

A Service Learning Subject Cultivates University Freshmen's Social Responsibility through a Health Ambassador Scheme: Mentoring Health Ambassadors in School Communities

REGINA L.T. LEE, TOMMY T. M. HUNG, HUNG NAM CHENG, CHUNG MING WU, HANG CHUN LEUNG, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

ABSTRACT

A Health Ambassador Scheme (HAS) was established at the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre (WHO CC) School of Nursing, PolyU in 2010 with the aim of promoting health by giving university and primary school students opportunities for engagement and leadership. University students acted as the mentors of the primary school students. The HAS provides a framework for engaging school communities in healthy eating and active living. It involves a holistic approach and a community-campus partnership in which both sides work together to create an environment that has a positive impact on a child's health and learning. Healthy children make better learners, and better educated children are healthier. It is an innovative and effective approach to communicating important health information to peers in school communities. School policy makers can integrate the components of the HAS into school health policy to enable young leaders to promote health with a sense of belonging in school communities.

Key words: university freshmen, service learning subject, social responsibility, mentoring

1. INTRODUCTION

To appreciate the essence of service learning and apply the knowledge acquired from the core subjects, the subject team has designed a service-learning subject entitled "Mentoring Health Ambassadors for School Communities" via the PolyU School of Nursing's HAS, with the aim of enabling university freshmen to gain experiential learning and to provide them with opportunities through high-impact practices of mentoring and service learning. Service learning integrates community service with academic instruction so that each strengthens the other, and the subject assessment components also provide time for reflection and critical thinking while making significant contributions to individuals, organizations and communities.

2. AIM

In the service-learning subject, university students participate in service to the community either through enrolment in credit courses offering service learning as an option or requirement, or through participation in a co-curricular service-learning program on campus. The purpose of the mentoring and service-learning within this newly-developed subject is to utilize what university freshmen have learnt from the taught subjects to then equip and mentor primary school students and train them as health ambassadors. These student ambassadors thus acquire basic health screening skills, communication skills, and health education knowledge that enables them to deliver health talks, promote healthy lifestyles, and perform simple first-aid procedures for their peers in the school setting.

3. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A SERVICE-LEARNING SUBJECT

Regina L.T. Lee, Tommy T. M. Hung, Hung Nam Cheng, Chung Ming Wu, Hang Chun Leung, World Health Organization for Community Health Services, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Email: regina.lee@polyu.edu.hk

Children and adolescents are healthy in Hong Kong, but childhood obesity and sedentary lifestyles are prevalent due to, amongst other reasons, not practicing regular exercise and having mental health problems with substance abuse at a younger age. The school setting can positively influence the lifelong physical, social and mental health of students. In 2005, the WHO found that the school health promotion activities that were most effective at changing behaviors in schools were those that focused on positive well-being behaviors, physical participation and healthy dietary habits. There is a need to determine what practices and activities best support the school development plan, which is aligned with the objective of 'better schools through health' since it affects the health and behavior outcomes of students and their learning.

The development of the service-learning subject entitled: "Mentorship health ambassadors for school communities" consisted of three stages: Stage 1 – curriculum development and training, Stage 2 – program implementation and mentoring, and Stage 3 – program evaluation and report writing. In the first stage, the subject leader and the subject team met and identified learning objectives and content in the development of the HAS in the school communities, including the theoretical framework and principles of primary health care, the role of mentoring, leadership skills, family and life, and curriculum to train technical skills and professional knowledge. A project plan for experiential learning for the university freshmen. Hands-on job training to implement the mentorship health ambassador program were conducted, and training materials were developed including basic skills and knowledge in performing simple first aid procedures, performing health screening and health education on nutrition and exercise.

Health Ambassadors were expected to apply what they had learnt from the training program to provide basic health screening and nursing skills in the assigned primary school with the health ambassadors under the mentors' leadership and supervision. The university freshmen acted as mentors and worked together with the health ambassadors to launch and deliver a series of school health education and health promotion activities including promoting regular exercise, physical well-being and personal hygiene. A one-day summer camp was planned with the aim of recapping and reflecting on what they had learnt, and to share these valuable experiences (Lee et al., 2013).

4. IMPLICATION OF THE PROJECT

The HAS mentorship training program has demonstrated its impact in helping university and primary school students to adopt their assigned roles in promoting healthy eating and active living to the primary school students and their parents in the school community. It is an innovative and effective approach to communicating important health information to peers and their family members in school communities. School policy makers can integrate the components of the HAS into school health policy in order to enable young leaders to promote health with a sense of belonging in school communities.

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