The Impact of Service-Learning: A Case Study of a Corporate-Community- University Partnership in Hong Kong

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1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

Service-learning (SL) program provides an opportunity for students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world contexts. Through experiential learning and community engagement activities, students offered a chance to collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds and to meet community needs. In 2017-18 academic year, a total of 272 university students enrolled in two SL subjects and provided services to students from nine secondary schools. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effectiveness of the program from the service recipients' perspective with the use of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods.

Keywords: Service-learning, Service recipients, Community-University Partnership

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2. Introduction

Service learning is a type of experiential learning that integrates real-life experiences into academic knowledge (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Different from the traditional approaches to teaching and learning, it aims at promoting students' intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies and strengthening their civic responsibilities (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett, 2007). Although the benefits of service learning program are well documented (e.g., Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Probe, 2014; Eyler, 2009; La Lopa, 2012), little is known whether the findings can be generalized to other non- western contexts. Thus, there is a need to explore the positive outcomes of this unique pedagogical approach in other settings or population groups.

3. Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

Over the past decades, the number and type of organized after-school programs have been rapidly increased (e.g., Kremer et al., 2015). Organized after-school programs could be a significant contributor for promoting positive psychological well-being and better academic performance among adolescents (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). This is particularly important among adolescents living in poverty. Low socio-economic status was associated with poor school adjustment, higher emotional and psychosocial problem (Shek, 2002; Becker & Luthar, 2002). In Hong Kong, 180,000 adolescents suffered from financial hardship (Hong Kong Census and Statistic Department, 2016). However, research on the effectiveness of after-school programs is scarce in Hong Kong. Clearly, more research is needed to understand whether Chinese adolescents in low socio-economic neighborhoods benefit from after-school programs, such as service-learning activities. The present study attempted to address this research gap.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted in the 2017-18 academic year where a total of 272 students enrolled in two courses "APSS2S09 Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs" and "APSS2S05 Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" at the Department of Applied Social Sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Students were required to provide 40 hours of mandatory services to serve children and adolescents of low socio-economic status. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the assessment of learning outcomes, multiple assessment methods are used to evaluate the impact of the program and perceptions of the subjects from different stakeholders. The current study sought to evaluate the service recipients' perception of two service-learning subjects and its impacts on their developmental characteristics with both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Measures

Subjective outcome evaluation—Secondary school students (service recipients, *N* = 498)

At the end of the semester, a total of 498 secondary school students were asked to completed a 28- item questionnaire, which assessed their perception of the service activities (9 items), the service implementers (9 items) and the effectiveness of service activities (10 items). A 6-point scale from "1-very unhelpful" to "6-very helpful" was used. Descriptive statistics were derived using SPSS version 23.

Focus-group interviews

Second, qualitative data were selected from service recipients' reflection in a focus group interview in one cooperated local secondary school under the Project WeCan Project. A list of semi- structured questions were used to guide the participants to reveals their in-depth feelings and perception towards the service learning subjects we provided. The focus group interview last around 1 hour and consisted 7 participants in full transcript. The questions were mainly related to service recipients' evaluation of the contents of the activities, the evaluations of the service providers and the personal gains after joining the service. Their views on all service activities were also investigated. The data was examined, categorizing and tabulating with evidences to address the goal of the study and bring the meaning to the study in an in-depth manner. Framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) would be used for data analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

In general, the service recipients perceived the service activities positively. The percentage of the rating of "4" or above on a 6-point Likert scale ranged from 76.0% to 96.5% (Tables 2-5). Regarding the findings of students' evaluations of the contents of the activities, 92.7% of the students perceived the content design of the activities prepared by the service providers as very good, 92.3% of the students felt that the format of the activities was appropriate, and 93.1% of the students found that the atmosphere of the activities was pleasant (Table 2).

On the evaluation of service providers, 96.1% of the service recipients found that the university students showed professional attitudes, 96.5% thought that the university students were actively involved in the services, and 95.1% reported that the university students showed readiness to offer help to them when needed (Table 3).

Regarding to the service recipients' evaluations of the effectiveness of the service activities, 83.9% of the students found that the service activities had enhanced their self-confidence, 85.2% thought that they had broadened their horizons, 78.8% thought that the activities were very useful to them, and 82.3% of them reported that it had promoted their holistic development (Table 4).

Qualitative method, such as focus group interviews were conducted to elicit feedback from service recipients. Results showed that the service recipients have

a positive evaluation to the service content and the service providers, as well as perceived that the service activities were very useful to them in their personal development.

Focus group interview - Secondary school students (service recipients)

Apart from completing a subjective outcome evaluation form, qualitative method, such as focus group interviews were conducted to elicit feedback from service recipients. The major theme were analyzed as follow:

Service recipients' perceived the service positively

They used "have fun", "meaningful" "a special place", "learned a lot from the school visit" and "treasure the chance to visit university". They thought that joining service activities were valuable to their learning and gave them personal satisfaction.

> *"What impressed me the most is PolyU visit…A group of university students took us to visit their departments and the lecture rooms.it was meaningful." (Male 2, joined the service for two years)*
> *"I gained a lot when I went to PolyU, those university students have competence to teach us and shared their professional knowledge to us deliberately." (Female 1, first time to join the service)*

Service recipients treasured the mentoring relationship with the service providers

They mentioned that service providers were "kind", "responsive", "patience", "professional", "cared them a lot", "encouraged them to complete a task", "give them direction in their life" and "feel good" to have them.
> *"I have never met university students before… they really cared us a lot. They are young and energetic…for example, they taught me how to answer the English questions with care and patience…I think I will give up without their support." (Female 1, first time to join the service)*
> *"My co-walker was very nice. She proofread my writing and taught me grammar in the service activities. Meanwhile, she gave me ideas and suggestions on my career planning. I accepted and chose what she suggested to me." (Female 4, first time to join the service) "I was impressed by one of the university students' professional attitude. I remembered he was the only one to wait for me as I just finished a competition and arrived there at 7 pm. He was waiting for me ... I couldn't believe how responsible he was." (Male 2, second year to join the service)*

<u>Developed the service recipients' competence, aspiration and resilience</u>

Service recipients witnessed their changes after joining the services. The co-walking experiences with service providers helped them realized their potential, gave them aspiration and strengthen their resilience level.

> *"From their (university students) sharing, I learned that they had their drawbacks in academic. They strived for a university degree with efforts. I think I can do it, I can try..."(Male 1, first year to join the service)*
> *"I know more about the university... I want to work harder and hope that I can be the one of them (university students) in the future... I understand my goals... I know what I want to be, what I want to do..." (Female 5, second year to join the service)*
> *"I was a person with low self-efficacy. With the support of teachers (university students) and my classmates, I know I have to work harder for my future and upgrade myself undoubtedly. I cannot let them down. How to say, they (university students) gave me motivation, value and positivism that change my personality a lot."(Female 1, first time to join the service)*

6. Conclusion

The current study demonstrates the positive impact of service-learning subjects among Hong Kong students. More specifically, the mutual benefits were shown in both secondary and university students. Using qualitative and quantitative approaches, students' learning experiences have been enhanced in caring and supportive environments. Our study sheds light on the importance of providing different learning opportunities for students in Hong Kong.

Table 1. Summary of students' perception toward the subjects (N=498)

	Mea	SD
1. The contents of the activities (9 items)	4.97	0.93
2. The evaluations of the service implementers (9 items)	5.15	0.88
3. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the service activities (10 items)	4.92	1.01

Note: All items are on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of secondary school students' evaluation of the contents of activities

		Mean	Respondents with positive responses	
			n	%
1.	The content design of the activity is very good.	4.91	458	92.7
2.	The format of the activity is appropriate.	4.97	454	92.3
3.	The atmosphere of the activity was pleasant.	5.04	461	93.1
4.	There was much peer interaction amongst the students.	4.98	452	91.5
5.	I participated in the activity actively.	5.00	459	93.1
6.	I was encouraged to do my best.	4.84	434	90.8
7.	The learning experience enhanced my interests towards the service.	4.91	449	90.9
8.	Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the activity.	5.00	456	92.9
9.	On the whole, I like this activity very much.	4.98	442	90.4

Note: All items are on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree. Only respondents with positive responses (Options 4-6) are shown in the table.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of secondary school students' evaluation of service implementers

		Mean	Respondents with positive responses	
			n	%
1.	PolyU student(s) was (were) well prepared for the activity.	5.12	460	93.3
2.	PolyU student(s) showed professional attitudes.	5.19	473	96.1
3.	PolyU student(s) understood my needs and potential.	4.94	438	88.8
4.	PolyU student(s) was (were) actively involved.	5.30	474	96.5
5.	PolyU student(s) encouraged me to participate in the activity.	5.16	463	93.9
6.	PolyU student(s) cared about me.	5.05	451	92.0
7.	PolyU student(s) showed readiness to offer help to me when needed.	5.20	470	95.1

		Mean	n	%
8.	PolyU student(s) had much interaction with us.	5.11	456	92.9
9.	Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the PolyU students.	5.24	464	95.1

Note: All items are on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree. Only respondents with positive responses (Options 4-6) are shown in the table.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of secondary school students' evaluation of effectiveness of service activities

			Respondents with positive responses	
		Mean	n	%
1.	It has strengthened my resilience in adverse conditions.	4.78	401	81.8
2.	It has helped me to face the future with a positive attitude.	4.87	403	82.4
3.	It has enhanced my self-confidence.	4.95	412	83.9
4.	It has broadened my horizons.	5.05	416	85.2
5.	It has enhanced my interests towards my studies.	4.97	398	81.7
6.	It has enhanced my ability of caring.	4.97	401	82.0
7.	It has helped me to develop a good relationship with adults (for example, teachers and parents, etc.).	4.81	371	76.0
8.	It has promoted my aspiration.	4.95	381	78.6
9.	It has promoted my holistic development.	5.01	399	82.3
10.	On the whole, I think the activity is very useful to me.	4.98	383	78.8

Note: All items are on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Very Unhelpful, 2 = Unhelpful, 3 = Slightly Unhelpful, 4 = Slightly Helpful, 5 = Helpful, 6 = Very Helpful. Only respondents with positive responses (Options 4-6) are shown in the table.

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