

Paper Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

A Case Study in Building a Caring Community:

Service-Learning in a Primary School

Ms. Violet Sze-Man HAU

CCC WanChai Church Kei To Primary School, Hong Kong SAR

violethau@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines one school's participation in community building through the P.5 Service Learning Program. The *Service Learning Project* is built on the premise that a collaborative model, drawing on support from school management, parents and community resources, must be employed to contribute to a caring and harmonious society.

A wide range of data sources comprising a questionnaire, observation field notes and student work were used to collect information on the impact of service-learning on participants. It was evident that all informants were empowered, and made significant personal growth throughout the P.5 service-learning program (120 students, 10 teachers, 2 social workers, 30 parents and 120 senior citizens). Students developed a collaborative spirit together with improved social and communication skills. Most importantly, they cultivated a positive attitude towards elderly people. Parents learnt about certain needs of members of our community and plan to organise regular parent-child visits to senior citizens. Teachers and social workers have a better understanding of their students, enabling them to improve the quality of programming. Old people are taking special roles in encouraging and sharing their life experiences with children.

Recommendations for forging intergenerational partnerships and building a caring community will be discussed in this paper.

Service-Learning in the Context of Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, curriculum reforms have recommended service learning as one of the five essential learning experiences. This approach to learning is also advocated as a key strategy in promoting Moral and Civic Education as positive values for students. The Curriculum Development Council recognized that community service of an authentic nature could provide real-life learning opportunities through which our students can develop civic

responsibility and empathy (Curriculum Development Council, 2001).

Service learning is defined in the *General Studies for Primary Schools Curriculum Guide* as “providing authentic learning experiences for students to learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized services. Through service learning, students conduct self-reflection on what they learn and how they learn”. (Curriculum Development Council, 2002).

The Case School and YauMaTei District

CCC WanChai Church Kei To Primary School is a whole day, co-educational, Christian primary school, located in YauMaTei. There are 18 classes with about 600 students. YauMaTei is an old district with a rich multi-faceted culture - the nightlife of Temple Street, the street life of Cantonese Opera singing and the architectural heritage seen in the police station, the theatre, and the Fruit Laans market (The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2004).

Many senior citizens reside in the area of YauMaTei. The Salvation Army Yau-Tsim Integrated Service for Senior Citizens supports the needs of elderly people. Owing to the dense population of elderly people in the community, recently the school has focused on developing student respect for senior citizens. In the academic year 2004-2005, the school, in cooperation with The Salvation Army Yau Tsim Integrated Service for Senior Citizens and The Salvation Army Yaumatei Integrated Service for Young People, designed a P.5 service-learning program. This project was linked to the General Studies Curriculum and received funding from the Social Welfare Department, “Opportunities for the Elderly Project”. All P.5 students were required to plan and participate in one service learning activity; Class P.5A organised a Christmas party, P.5B visited and engaged in an activity with senior citizens, and P.5C visited a museum and ate lunch with the elderly. Students were required to work cooperatively to complete the task and ensure the well being of the seniors during their meetings and excursions. Afterwards, a celebration was held to commend the students on their success and hard work throughout their service learning.

Learning Outcomes- Building a Caring Community

Building caring communities can be defined as “a process that communities can use to become stronger and improve the well-being of all citizens” (Building Caring Communities-A Community Workbook, p.1). Throughout this process, there is the potential for improving the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of individuals and of the community as a whole. Building a caring society can create stronger connections among community members so as to promote a greater sense of belonging and provide a more

supportive environment (Building Caring Communities-A Community Workbook). Using community resources and building partnerships are essential elements for creating a harmonious society. The P.5 service-learning project has thrown light on working partnerships which create a better community. In this section, I will highlight how each party benefited and became empowered by the project. The contributions made to society building will also be discussed.

1. *The students*

All P.5 students were required to participate in this project. Each class was given a task and students needed to work cooperatively to show care for older citizens. In order to support students for service learning, a student-learning diary was designed to allow students to reflect on their learning experiences. Workshops outlining how to get to know old people and tips for going out with senior citizens were organised in advance. Debriefing sessions were arranged for students to reflect on their learning experiences. To sustain student learning, students were required to interview an elderly person and do something special to demonstrate their care.

Many students were born in nuclear families, where they had had only a few opportunities to chat with grandparents. Prior to participating in the project, students were shy or uncomfortable when talking to old people. Once the project was completed, students appeared at ease communicating with the elderly. During the celebration meeting, a parent stated, *“My son seldom talked to his grandfather. Through the opportunity provided by the elderly project, my son gained some experience in talking with old people. In addition, the project learning provided a chance for my son to interview his grandpa. This has opened a window for them to talk... On the coldest day of the Chinese New Year’s Eve, my son took the initiative to phone his grandpa to remind him to wear more clothes. From now on, I will arrange more opportunities for my children to visit their grandparents”*.

Another student learned about the history of Hong Kong in General Studies. In her service-learning diary, she wrote, *“Many old people have worked hard to make a significant contribution to society. Without their efforts, Hong Kong would not be in great prosperity. We therefore should respect old people”*.

In conclusion, these two examples demonstrated that students became more comfortable chatting with old people which in turn helped them develop respect for old people. This indeed is a foundation on which to build a caring society.

2. *The elderly*

Approximately the same group of elderly people, those who had had ample opportunity to communicate with students, participated in various activities during this project. The old people went to ShaTin where they told the students stories about Hong Kong. They went to a restaurant to have lunch with students. A “warming and caring” atmosphere pervaded the restaurant. As the teachers interviewed the old people, the old people stated that *“We are very happy today. The visit to ShaTin Museum brought back a lot of memories. We were able introduce students to the New Territories and Chinese Opera, those who showed interest were able to learn about the old Hong Kong. The children were very caring, they took care of us during the mealtime. I would like to give thanks to Kei To Primary School. Thank you to the headmistress, teachers, parents and The Salvation Army workers who made a lot of effort to organise this meaningful activity for us.”*

The old people possessed many talents and they prepared performances for the Christmas party. Some of the elderly had the opportunity to sing songs and perform on musical instruments. The students were all amazed by the old people’s talents. In his diary, a student wrote *“The old people were super, they sang beautiful songs, they could even play the synthesizer and the harmonicas. I must spend more time on practicing the piano so that I can, like the old people, perform in front of others”*. After the performance, students served the old people a simple snack and chatted with them. Even though the seniors were meeting the students for the first time it was very homey. As the party came to an end, the elderly people prepared a gift for the students - a small calendar to remind students to make good use of their time for studying and learning. Overall the scene was filled with laughter, and this indeed touched teachers and other stakeholders very much.

It was not only in such enjoyable events that the senior citizens took a special role in encouraging students. During a visit to a home-bound estate, encouragement from the elderly people made an impact on a student who came from Mainland China. Nick found studying in Hong Kong very difficult and he often asked his mom to return to China. During the visit, an old man who had been an educator in China encouraged the boy to treasure the chance to study in Hong Kong. *“Little boy, your mandarin is very good. You can make use of your mandarin ability. There will be a lot of opportunities for you to communicate with others in mandarin. However, you need to study hard in Hong Kong. In China, not every child has a chance to study. Treasure your chance”*. This kind of encouragement made a significant impact on the boy, who subsequently developed motivation to study. After this incident, he seldom mentioned that he wanted to return back to China.

After various intergenerational activities, some of the elderly came to understand the needs of the students. They took the initiative to organise informal tutorial lessons with students. Mutual benefits were found throughout this process. Both the students and the elderly became receivers and givers.

3. *The parents*

The parents who worked as facilitators to promote interaction between students and the old people found this project meaningful. When parents visited the home-bound elderly in an estate, some students, who had extended family, were good at finding topics to talk about. During the debriefing meeting, one parent stated that *“Tommy is very good at talking to old people. I later found out that Tommy often spends half an hour talking with his grandmother. Starting now, I will arrange more opportunities for my children to meet their grandparents so as to develop their communication skills”*. Since Tommy was a quiet child, being praised in public helped him become more self confident. He started to talk with teachers and other classmates at school.

During the visit, parents began to realize that some of the old people were very lonely and physically weak. Appreciating this as a community need, parents took the initiative to visit the old people regularly so as to build a caring network in Yaumatei district.

4. *The School and the organisation*

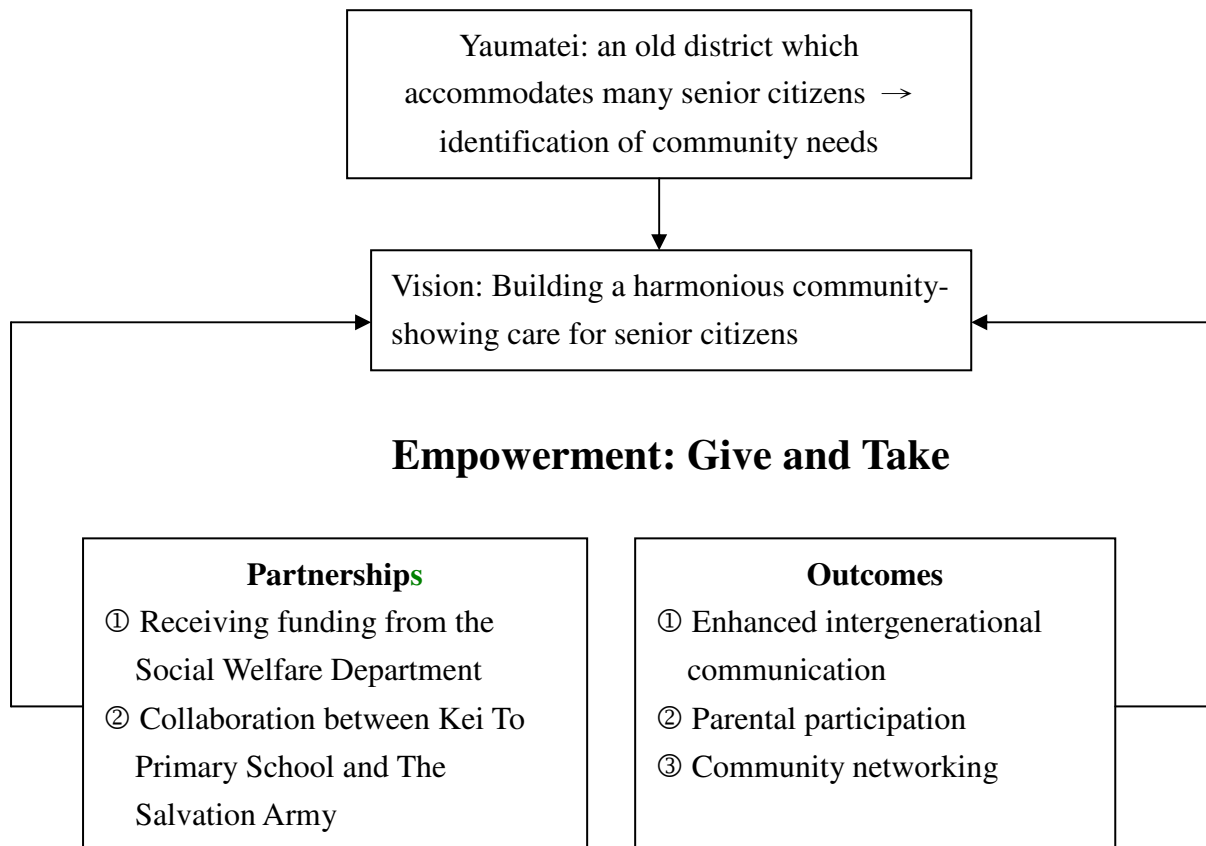
A lot of time and effort was needed to design appropriate activities for this project but the personal growth of both students and senior citizens has given us energy and strength to work for the sake of the community. A questionnaire demonstrated that most students experienced rewarding interactions with the old people. Parents indicated that the project was very meaningful. The school and the organization stated that the project was able to promote mutual care between the youngsters and the senior citizens. Many facets of the project have touched workers deeply - old people and parents showed appreciation for our work, students became motivated to learn and developed respect for the old people, it was a joyful experience of generations mingling together to learn how to serve different age groups. In conclusion, the project was meaningful for everyone involved. This not only empowered all parties but served as a step forward in creating a caring society.

A Model for Intergeneration Partnerships

Building on our same vision of encouraging students to care for the elderly so as to

develop a caring community, the working team discussed and implemented our learning activities. Drawing from our experience, it was apparent that a number of essential elements had made the program successful. In this section, I will highlight several elements in building a caring community.

Table One: Building a Caring Community



Making the Partnerships Work

Irizarry (1996) has discussed several essential elements for ensuring success in implementing service-learning projects. These elements include (1) building working teams to implement the project, (2) ensuring the school principal is committed to the project, (3) establishing trust among the groups involved, (4) maintaining constant communication and trust, (5) personal commitment from teachers and, a most important factor, (6) mutual investment. Based on Irizarry's ideas on partnership, and drawing from our project experiences, I will attempt to discuss how Kei To Primary School and The Salvation Army, worked hand in hand to promote service-learning.

1. Identifying community needs and sharing the same vision for building a caring community

The old district of Yaumatei has provided a window of opportunity for Kei To Primary School and The Salvation Army to work collaboratively in caring for old people. Sharing the same vision of building a caring community, we have attempted to build a

network within the community. Examples of this network can be found in the organisation of parent-child visits and arrangements for tutorial lessons after school.

2. *Building a “core group” to implement the project and involve the school principal*

Both the school and The Salvation Army appointed representatives to form a working group in which all members had a passionate commitment to service-learning. We developed clear documentation to allocate jobs and responsibilities. In addition, the principal was well informed of all progress. She took part in some of the activities, meeting the elderly people and encouraging students to serve others.

3. *Establishing trust among the groups involved*

Having a working group and receiving support from the principal was our first step towards establishing trust. Trust is needed between school, organization, teachers and other stakeholders. We were from different backgrounds and held different working habits and styles. Constant communication was, therefore, essential.

4. *Empowerment*

Each party has made a significant contribution to the project. The workers used their strengths to implement the project, the old people contributed to the educational process and made an important impact on children's lives. Children brought an abundance of energy, enthusiasm and support into the lives of seniors. In a nutshell, intergenerational communication pervaded throughout the project, in that learning could be found among older and younger generations (Kaplan, 2002).

5. *Utilising community resources*

Representatives from the school worked hard to draw on various resources. We applied for funding from the Social Welfare Department; we mobilised parents and senior citizens to serve as volunteers for the project. The network which developed from this permitted the school to implement the project effectively.

Conclusion

This local school example demonstrates how to make use of society resources to implement a P.5 service-learning program. A collaborative model was employed where the case school and The Salvation Army formed a working partnership contributing to a caring community. It was evident that all participants were empowered and intergenerational communication was enhanced. The caring ethos continued because some participants identified the needs of special groups. Parents have taken the initiative to organise a

parent-child visit to an estate of home-bound people. Elderly people want to use their talents to organise tutorial lessons for children. In summation, the partnerships engendered in the project not only empowered the participants, but continue to sustain intergenerational activities thus making a significant impact on the community.

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