

Paper Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Best Buddies Hong Kong – Friendship movement between People with and without Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper introduces Best Buddies, an international friendship movement for people with and without intellectual disabilities originated from the United States since 1989. It is first introduced in Hong Kong in 2004 by Fu Hong Society. The aim of Best Buddies is to enhance the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by providing one-to-one friendship and integrated employment. Students and citizens volunteers are recruited to be matched with persons with intellectual disabilities. In the first year a total of seven Best Buddies chapters were established in secondary schools and universities with total participation of 150 students.

Introduction

Best Buddies (www.bestbuddies.org) is an international friendship movement for people with and without intellectual disabilities. It was first established in the United States in 1989 by Mr. Anthony Kennedy Shriver and was introduced to Hong Kong in early 2004. Its objective is to enhance the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by providing one-to-one friendship and integrated employment. It aims at promoting a better understanding of and social integration for people with intellectual disabilities. More than 10 countries and regions are accredited by the Best Buddies International to operate Best Buddies country programs. The movement now reaches a total of 1,200 middle schools, high schools and universities all over the world with participants of 200,000 persons.

Peer buddies (students or citizens) are committed to making regular telephone and physical contacts with their matched buddies (persons with intellectual disabilities) in one academic year. The major difference of Best Buddies movement and other volunteering service is that it provides friendship between people with and without intellectual disabilities. Participants will be enriched with their lives via this friendship and help build up a harmonious society.

Best Buddies operates six different programs in the United States including: Middle School, High School, College, Citizens, e-Buddies and Job Buddies programs. But in Hong Kong it operates four programs which include: College, Secondary School, Citizens and e-Buddies in year 2004 due to different education and social background between the United States and Hong Kong.

Development in Hong Kong:

Fu Hong Society (www.fuhong.org) was accredited by the Best Buddies International to set up the Best Buddies Hong Kong (BBHK) in March 2004. During its first year development, a total of three universities and four secondary schools had formed chapters within campus with participants of 150 students. About 80 buddies who were persons with intellectual disabilities were recruited from Fu Hong Society to form buddy pairs with the students in 2004. Also a total of 12 citizens of the local community were recruited and were matched with buddies of Fu Hong Society.

Centralized Activities of BBHK:

Apart from individual Best Buddies chapter activities, a number of centralized activities had been organized by Fu Hong Society to promote the movement in Hong Kong as below:

- (a) April to October 2004, Educational talks on secondary schools and universities,
- (b) June 2004, Chinese Translation of “BBHK” Title Competition.
- (c) July 2004, Sponsoring of one student leader and one staff member to attend the Best Buddies International 15th Annual Leadership Conference in the United States,
- (d) August 2004, Volunteer training course for students.
- (e) November 2004, Leadership training course for chapter members.

- (f) March 2005, No-flame Cooking Competition
- (g) May 2005, Charity sales of BBHK T-shirt and display of buddy pairs artwork in the Benetton retailing shops.
- (h) July 2005, sponsoring of two student leaders and one staff member to attend the Best Buddies International 16th Annual Leadership Conference in the United States,
- (i) July 2005, sponsoring of buddy pairs to attend The Second Hong Kong Conference for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities.

Support provided by Fu Hong Society:

BBHK participating schools and universities received the following support from both the Best Buddies International and Fu Hong Society:

- (a) Provision of operational manual by the Best Buddies International to each secondary school and university chapter.
- (b) Seeking funding support by Fu Hong Society from public and corporate funding bodies to support the BBHK movement.
- (c) Financial sponsorship from both Fu Hong Society and outside funding bodies be secured for some of the centralized promotional programs and annual leadership conference in the United States.
- (d) Social workers from Fu Hong Society will help to deliver talk and training in schools for peer buddies (students) on understanding of intellectual disabilities and the operation of BBHK chapters.
- (e) Host sites which are service units of Fu Hong Society will help to recruit persons with intellectual disabilities to be matched with the peer buddies. Premises of host sites will also be used for buddy pairs meeting and group activities.
- (f) Social workers of host sites will offer assistance and advice to chapter in organizing activities and help solving difficulties encountered.
- (g) Social workers of host sites will be responsible to monitor on the progress and development of buddy pair friendships together with the chapter officers and faculty advisors.

Impacts of BBHK program:

As the BBHK program has only been put into operation for one year in Hong Kong, systematic evaluation of its program effectiveness has yet to be completed and data to be collected and analyzed. Nevertheless, a number of observations could be concluded on its impacts in three different aspects including peer buddies (students), buddies (persons with intellectual disabilities) and the host sites (service units of Fu Hong Society).

Peer Buddies

Firstly, on the peer buddies aspect, students from secondary schools and universities have a unique opportunity to understand person with intellectual disabilities through one-to-one friendship. Some of them may have had indirect access to intellectual disabilities either through previous isolated contacts with person with intellectual disabilities or visit to service facilities. But none of them have been relating to person with intellectual disabilities in a one-to-one basis.

Unlike their peer buddies in the United States, no fellow students with intellectual disabilities could be found in the secondary school and university campus in Hong Kong. Hence, BBHK program provides peer buddies with opportunities to have a personal experience in getting to understand persons with intellectual disabilities from a close distance. This helps them to develop a better and fuller understanding on meaning of life by relating with a person at a “disadvantaged” position comparing to them.

An increasing number of secondary schools in Hong Kong are now putting more input on the life education in supplement to the academic curriculum for personal development of their students. One participating post secondary school with international students has included the BBHK program as one of the modules for their community service curriculum which every student is required to complete in one academic year.

Buddies

Secondly, on the buddy aspect, persons with intellectual disabilities seldom have access to friendship with the able-bodied. BBHK program helps them to better integrate into the community by enjoying the same social life as their peer buddies do. While traditional volunteering service is usually on group basis, persons with intellectual disabilities are usually being served by volunteers on an unequal level of contacts. They seldom have the opportunities to interact with the able bodied on an equal basis and share the joy and

happiness in friendship. This BBHK program offers buddies with one friendship at a time and a good opportunity to practice their social skills.

The lacking of social skills and interpersonal relationship for buddies are major obstacles for them to integrate into the society. These also hinder buddies to enjoy the same rights of social life as other ordinary member does. For adult buddy, good social skills and interpersonal relationship are beneficial to the seeking and maintenance of a descent job which form a core stone to their personal development.

In the No-flame Cooking Competition, students with their buddy partners form a team to take part in the cooking exercise. Buddy pairs demonstrated a variety of abilities and talents in the cooking process. The competition was open to non members of the BBHK program and many of them were deeply impressed by the potentials exhibited by persons with intellectual disabilities.

Host Sites

Thirdly, BBHK program open up a new arena for the host sites (service units of the Fu Hong Society) in implementing social integration activities for persons with intellectual disabilities. In view of the changing service trend in the rehabilitation sector with a greater stress on building community support and social integration for persons with disabilities, service providers would need to attend their service beyond the physical boundary of the service unit.

BBHK program is able to help the building up of community support by recruiting students and citizens to be matched with buddies on a one-to-one friendship. The peer buddies form a great pool of volunteers from the community at no cost in helping the buddies integrate into the society. This also helps the general public to have a better understanding on the services of the host sites and in turn generate increasing support both in volunteering and financing resources.

The host sites are able to enlarge its contact network in volunteer recruitment through the increased contact network of BBHK program. A host site would be able to offer a much wider range of service opportunities to its service recipients in social integration without additional cost. The BBHK program could also be an attractive event in soliciting funding support from public corporations amid other competitors in the social service sector

in Hong Kong.

Obstacles

There are a number of obstacles when the BBHK program was first put into operation in Hong Kong. Firstly, there is significant difference in educational, cultural and social background between students of the United State and that of Hong Kong. Hence, both structure and details in the operation of the BBHK have to be modified in suiting the Hong Kong environment.

In general, students of Hong Kong are much heavily indebted with academic homework and survival with keen competition in open examination. Volunteering and social service participation, except in the international school, are of less weight in both students and the school administration. Students are unable to spare much time as comparing to their counterparts in the United States in taking part in the BBHK program.

In the beginning we start with a smaller number of participants from the secondary schools and universities. By restricting the number of student participation, we are able to focus our attention and support to them in their chapter formation and development. It is also matching with the operation principle of the Best Buddies International that stresses quality other than quantity in the establishment of chapters in secondary schools and universities.

In the first year of operation, a total of fifteen secondary schools indicated interest in the BBHK program. However, after initial contacts with the responsible school principals or teachers it was found that some of them were not ready for commitment in accordance with the BBHK requirement. Hence, only four secondary schools could join the BBHK program with the establishment of chapters in their campus. The remaining eleven secondary schools were invited to be a partner school with one of the service units of the Fu Hong Society. Training and volunteer service on a limited basis could only be provided to students of these eleven partner schools.

The second obstacle is the lack of understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities by students at large. Many of the student participants have no or little contacts with their buddies before. Hence, apart from training sessions conducted in schools, field visits are arranged to facilitate their understanding of people with intellectual

disabilities. A video is produced based on interview of buddy pairs and parent of buddy to offer a first hand experience and sharing for interested students.

The third obstacle is to overcome the worries behind all participating bodies, including peer buddy, buddy and family member of buddy, concerning the one-to-one friendship. The BBHK movement is relatively a new concept to all parties. A number of precautionary measures are built in to alleviate their fears and worries in the BBHK program including: (1) buddy pairs meeting and activities held inside the premises of host site; (2) staff attendance to all BBHK activities both indoors and outdoors; (3) all buddy pairs be monitored by host site staff on the friendship development; (4) all BBHK activity plan be vetted by staff member of host site; and (5) unlimited access by family members of buddy to BBHK activities.

Future development:

In the forthcoming year, BBHK would extend its host site coverage to special schools, a training centre and social club of other non-governmental organizations. This will enhance a wider range of participation from people with intellectual disabilities to the BBHK program.

Also, it would introduce a Harman Survey which is developed by the Best Buddies International in the United States, to evaluate the program effectiveness of BBHK. Financial sponsorship would be solicited from both government and public corporation to support the extension of the BBHK program with a wider range of participations from students and people with intellectual disabilities.

BBHK program would continue to seek family support from people with intellectual disabilities. We will have to handle the worries of family members toward the BBHK program. Direct involvement in and free access of family members into the BBHK activities would help to build up mutual trust and confidence in the program.

Public education on social integration of people with intellectual disabilities would be continued by means of educational talks in schools and universities. More secondary schools would be invited to become partners with host sites of Fu Hong Society. This would help students to have an increased contacts with people with intellectual disabilities and to build up a larger pool of volunteer resources for the service units.

The no-flame cooking competition was a great success in March 2005. It would be held again in March 2006. This event is open to general public and serves as a good show case on the potentials of people with intellectual disabilities and their full integration into the society.

Conclusion

Best Buddies is a unique volunteering program for students and citizens that will continue for a lifetime. It has touched the lives of 250,000 people through more than 1,200 middle schools, high schools and colleges around the world. With the participations of students and citizens we are able to make changes to the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. They join together to build up a harmonious society with full participation for all members including people with intellectual disabilities.