

Abstract:

Leadership development in service-learners through a self-concept and career-awareness project for orphan children (paper presentation)

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1. Introduction

This paper/study is to examine and to document the mechanism of a project that helps the service-learners gain and develop their leadership and self-concept in one of our service-learning projects named: “Building self-concept and carer awareness for orphan children in the SOS Village, Ho Chi Minh City”. The mechanism includes many steps and procedures from the preparation period of the project (assessing the community needs, working with community organizations, recruiting students, training and orientation, arranging agreements between stakeholders, monitoring and evaluation, etc of the project) to the entire on-going and the evaluation period of the project. Leadership and self-awareness development in service-learners are measured through group work and discussions, reflection journals, monitoring and evaluations of the project showing the development process of communication skills of service-learners while working with different stake-holders of the project.

Since service learning is newly adopted in UEF, this paper/study also means to be a foundation for building up the syllabus and service-learning courses in UEF in the future, in order to instutionalize the service-learning exeperience to the academic service-learning experience.

2. Theoretical framework/literature review

This study and the design of the serive-learning project based on the theory of Self-concept and career development of Super, (studies from 1953 to 1963). In his studies, Super states that self-concept has an important role in the formation of career development (Super 1963). People may compare their view about themselves with career concepts, and this identification process affects their career development. Super also claims that one of the main stages in a person’s career development is a transfer of a self-concept to a vocational self-concept.

The study also combines several theoretical models combining self-concept and vocational education, including the Self-concept theory in career development and counseling of Nancy E. Betz (1994). Betz claims that outdoor and recreational activities help students gain their self-concept and explore about themselves in a process of whole person education.

Another theory is the participatory pedagogy for education and empowerment of Paulo Freire (Freire 1972). Freire states that education should raise the awareness of the students so that they become the subjects, rather than objects, of the world. This is done by teaching students to think democratically and to continually question and make meaning from (critically view) everything they learn. Also, according to Chesler, Kellman-Fritz & Knife-Gould (2003), creating space for students to develop leadership skills within service-learning courses not only helps students

implement university-community projects, but also provides substantial opportunities for the students to shape the nature of the service-learning projects. Then service-learning projects are the most effective vehicle to foster leadership skills since they encourage students to co-produce knowledge and pattern of the project.

3. Methods/analysis

The author is the director of the Center of Service-Learning in UEF, also the designer of the service-learning project, who conducts the need assessment with the community organizations (the SOS Village in Ho Chi Minh city), and manages the project. The author also collects data from all stake-holders includes service-learners (11 students of UEF), the coordinator of the project, the community supervisors, and beneficiaries of the project (30 children of SOS Village). Those 11 service-learners go through 14 sessions in 7 weeks, including 3 company visits and 11 other sessions working in different themes from learning and expressing the self, each others, dreams, emotions, searching information, making plans...

To examine the process of leadership development of the service-learners, the author uses qualitative data recorded from group discussions and sharing, journals, presentations and building profiles of service-learners to measure the individual development.

Data are structured and coded in categories of the mechanism/periods of the project, such as preparation, training, orientation, setting objectives and learning outcomes, reflection, monitoring and evaluation, and participatory approach.

4. Results and Discussion

Results:

Service-learners gain their leadership and working-with-people skills through the mechanism and the process of the project of building self-concept and career awareness. The findings includes:

- (1) While building self-concept and career awareness for orphan children through conducting many games, recreational activities, information searching and company visits with these children, students/service-learners also gain their own self-concept and personal growth;
- (2) While adapting participatory approach in making lesson plans by themselves through group discussions and using these lesson plans during the project, service-learners develop their ownership of the project and they lead many initiatives to ensure the success of the project, and therefore, enhance their huge change in leadership development;
- (3) Mechanism for building leadership skills are the opportunities that the project allow service-learners to participate into decision making process and communication with different stakeholders before and during the project; to participate into group work discussion, reflections and evaluation.

Discussion:

At first, service-learners are supposed to be the facilitators for the process of building self-concept and career awareness for orphan children. However, this process, in many ways, also helps them to understand well about themselves and other service-learners who they are working with in their own groups as well as the whole group. Service-learners reflect about the progress of changing in children and about their own development at the same time. They learn about their strengths, their weaknesses and more importantly, learn how to improve themselves. Thus, beneficiaries and service-learners gain their self-concept and personal growth in different levels.

Participatory approach is the key vehicle to have service-learners engaged in community and become the co-producers of knowledge and outcomes of the project. For making the lesson plans by participatory approach, service-learners have to participate in the need assessment and engaged themselves to the project objectives right at the beginning. They are also empowered to make decisions on how the lessons should be delivered to the children. Working by participatory approach also requires service-learners to understand the children better to enhance the lessons well and follow the process of self-concept development of the children closely.

Leadership development are not well recorded and facilitated without the mechanism of designed opportunities for service-learners to make decision and develop their critical thinking skills, to explore their capacities, and to lead initiatives. This mechanism functions as a vehicle for transforming the service-learners on the way they are working with the children.

Thus, teaching and raising self-concept for children helps service-learners, in turn, gain their own self-concept and personal growth. Self-concept also contributes to leadership development. Raising self-concept through a teaching process using participatory approach also helps children and service-learners develop their leadership skills. These processes happen in the background of the project mechanism that encourages service-learners to engage into community development and reflect about their own learning process.

(4) Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

The findings of this study are very important to prove the need of a structured mechanism of academic service-learning project on service-learners' leadership development. The study also proves the important role of participatory approach for projects which includes teaching patterns both on the community learners and service-learners. The meaning of service-learning in the way "you learn when you serve" is clearly indicated when measuring the benefits of personal growth of service-learners when they help children about self-concept.

This study also helps to organize systematically the related theories and researches for the designing of syllabus and curriculum for a service-learning course, combining the experience of the project and academic learning about leadership development and working with people in UEF in the future.

Keywords:

leadership in service-learners, self-concept and career awareness, participatory approach and service-learning

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Ms. Huong has nearly twenty years experience working in the field of development with grassroots organizations and disadvantaged groups. Huong received a Masters degree in International Development and Social Change from Clark University, USA. Huong is working in promoting civic engagement in higher education institutions such as UEF, Hoa Sen University, Ton Duc Thang U. and others in Vietnam.

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