

Introductory Service-Learning Experience: Macau College Students in Ethnic Minority School of Mountain Area in China

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Abstract

This paper described how university students from Macau took social responsibility in China through Service-Learning project. It was an introductory experience for the student participants and for the children in the mountain area as well. This study aimed at raising children's interest in learning and their desire of continuing study. Results were reported in four themes: (1) increasing personal competence of teamwork spirits, leadership and service skills; (2) students' perception towards poverty issue and education in China rural and mountain areas; (3) having commitment to the next service; (4) realizing that service-learning shall be a mutual learning process. This paper also provided an overview of how a living and learning community was dedicated to community service to educate residents to be a holistic person.

Key words: service-learning, poor alleviation, education, residential college

1. Introduction

In 2018, the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government was committed to following the Central Government's policy of precision poverty alleviation in Congjiang, Guizhou Province (Coutinho, 2018). Cheng Yu Tung College of University of Macau, as a living-learning community and a leading university in Macau conducted an investigation to understand their needs in July, 2018. After meeting with local government officials and principals, the very first Service-Learning program was launched in December, 2018 to provide voluntary teaching of Mandarin, music, physical education and arts.

“D” Primary School was located in the mountainous area and people were from a Chinese minority-Miao. Mandarin was rarely used and most of the villagers were

illiterate. Since China's reform and opening up, only 2 villagers had high school diploma in the population of 2,000 people. In the face of lacking education resources, "D" primary school only offered kindergarten, first and second grade learning environment. Children were reluctant to go for 3rd grade in other villages due to low learning motivation, transportation inconvenience or parents' orders. This project aimed at raising learning interest of these 67 second grade children, and motivating their desires of getting education. Meanwhile, it was also an introductory service experience for most of the College students. In the end, it showed that 13 College students took more social responsibility in response to Macau government policy and to motherland China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Macau SAR's Policy of Poverty Alleviation in Guizhou

On May 23, 2018, the Chief Executive of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government, Chui Sai On, and the Director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macau SAR, Zheng Xiaosong, respectively led a delegation to Guizhou Province to sign the "Poverty Alleviation Cooperation Framework Agreement" with the Guizhou Provincial Government to jointly launch poverty alleviation program. On the one hand, the Macau SAR Government would further deepen the cooperation between Guizhou and Macau in five areas, which were tourism, commerce, education, agriculture and informatization. On the other hand, Macau SAR Government would also assist Congjiang County focusing on "precise poverty alleviation work", which covered the eight scopes of "industry, tourism, culture affairs, education, healthcare, talent development, employment transfer, and donation" (Zhao, 2018). Other than that, the Chief Executive stressed the SAR Government would step up its effort to encourage further participation from the Macau community, regarding poverty reduction in Guizhou. Last but not least, according to the government-to-government agreement, the Macau SAR Government allocated an amount not exceeding 30 million renminbi to support rebuilding of a primary school campus in Congjiang County, which was exactly the "D" Primary mentioned in this study.

2.2 "D" Village and "D" Primary School

“D” Village was mainly composed of Chinese minority-Miao. The village was located on a high slope, the traffic was inconvenient and the information was not smooth. Most of the villagers spoke Miao instead of Mandarin. The villagers still lived in a very traditional farming way. “D” village had a total of 2,000 people and by 2018, there were 346 people still from poverty-stricken poor households.

“D” Primary School was located in the center of “D” Village, 26 kilometers away from the downtown. “D” School had 216 students, one kindergarten, three classes in the first grade, and two classes in the second grade. There were 9 in-service teachers and only one of them held undergraduate degree. Due to the location in the mountain area, “D” primary school and village might face the shortage of water for two to three months in a year and they might not have enough clean drinking water.

2.3 Residential Colleges of University of Macau and Cheng Yu Tung College

University of Macau implemented the Residential College system after relocating to its new campus in 2014. As of today, 10 living-learning residential colleges had been established. The objective of the University of Macau whole-person education model was to nurture self-reflective, caring, and socially responsible individuals who can grow in a challenging and multicultural environment (Chen H. D & Gong H, 2016). To achieve this objective, Cheng Yu Tung College organized several programs with the goals to encourage students to practice what they have learned in class and making contribution to the community, and making them a global citizen with sense of responsibility and patriotism.

2.4 Service-Learning and Citizenship

The project was designed based on the version of Fertman, White and White’s model (1996). The model included four phases: preparation, service, reflection and celebration. In the preparation phase, the team had to understand “D” primary school and students’ background, obtaining support from the school and then establishing the service-learning goals, organizing College volunteers to have pre-teaching training. In the service phase, the team started from exploration to understanding and from a group mode to an individual caring way. In the reflection phase, the team carried out group reflection and personal reflection, from What (what I did), So What (what I learned), Now What (how I use what I learned). The celebration phase showed the teaching outcomes to parents, the community and the institution (Jacoby, B.,1996).

It was believed that students can acquire knowledge more quickly when solving practical problems, while service learning provides such an environment. College students had to try to communicate with these children who didn't speak Mandarin fluently. The central claim of this field "service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both (Eyler, J& Giles,D.E 1999) had well displayed through children's behavior and College students' reflection.

In addition to the foregoing, Service-Learning also provided an ideal environment for connecting these disparate elements, which were values, knowledge, skills, efficacy and commitment, into effective citizenship development. Students would feel a sense of social responsibility first and then acknowledged the importance of social justice. Students might want to do more, seeking the way how to do it better and why it ended up like this. They would try to make a difference, being effective more so they might make strategies or even take some risks, which would also increase their self-confidence and abilities. Service-Learning had the capacity to develop students who felt connected to community to be committed to engaging in the next service. To sum up, participation in service-learning led to the values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment that underlay effective citizenship (Eyler, J& Giles,D.E 1999).

2.5 Project Design and Student Participants

The service-learning experience was designed for residential college students. Among these 13 participants, 5 were male and 8 were female. Most of them were from different academic disciplines. Only one student had the experience of doing volunteer service in their university life. It was a non-credit bearing, living-learning project and instructed by College Resident Fellow, faculty members, non-government organization and some university students from Congjiang. The project included 16 hours of classroom instruction and preparation, 24 hours of community service, and 6 hours focusing on evaluation.

2.6 Teaching Approach

In the service process, "communicative approach" was conducted and used in a small group discussion. This study divided 67 students into 12 groups and each group was assigned a teaching assistant. While one student instructor was in the front teaching, other teaching assistants shall make sure the children what to do and respond correctly. The teaching method trained children's ability in three aspects: linguistic

competence (its grammar and vocabulary), sociolinguistic competence (how to use and respond to language appropriately) and strategic competence (recognize and repair communication breakdowns before, during, or after they occur) (Miller & Aldred, 2000). In addition, a variety of teaching aids and a lot of interesting activities were applied as another teaching approach. The teaching aids were diverse so as to arouse the children's attention and interests. For example, children would play clarinet, use the labyrinth to practice mandarin, or have its own creative painting and so on. With the mentoring and supervision by the teaching assistants and student instructor, children had the opportunity to receive delicate care and attention. It was a student-centered project, especially for these children who were shy or unable to use Mandarin to express themselves.

3. Study Evaluation

The study used a qualitative description method to collect and analyze data. Data was collected by several means, including verbal presentation of student reflections in the meetings, students' written journal reflections, instructor's observations, and partner institution's feedback. In the analysis of teaching results, the study interviewed the school principal and some primary school student representatives to evaluate this project.

Journal reflection covered the topics of the meaning of service-learning, poverty alleviation, policy-making, education system, sense of social responsibility and personal growth such as teamwork spirits, cultural engagement, and service and leadership skills. All the data was systematically assigned codes to develop a number of meaningful conceptual units. Two researchers codified separately, and subsequently compared the categorizations derived by each.

4. Results and Discussion

Four major themes were identified as students were engaged in the project: a) increasing personal competence of teamwork spirits, leadership and service skills; b) college students' perception towards poverty issue and education in China rural and mountain areas; c) fostering the sense of commitment and social responsibility, and d) it was a mutual beneficial learning process.

4.1 Increasing Personal Competence of Teamwork Spirits, Leadership and Service Skills

The preparation training helped the team understand the ethnic minority culture, the meaning of Service-Learning and how to communicate with one another. This introductory service experience increased their ability of teamwork spirits in all phases and they also had a significant understanding of leadership and service.

“This Service-Learning journey was the happiest journey to me and my working group was very united and attentive. From the preparation to the on-site teaching, everyone in our group contributed their time and ideas selflessly. If there was any disagreement, we would listen, discuss and analyze it carefully in order to develop a more appropriate teaching plan for the children.” (#4)

“We had to teach in front of the classroom. We needed to instruct our teammates and the kids. Then we would become teaching assistants in turns. This made us a leader and a good follower” (#5)

“I am grateful we had each other. We learned how to lead from/in love and service.” (#10)

“At the beginning, I thought being the instructor in the front of the classroom would be the most exhausting job, but after the first day, I found that being the teaching assistant with children was the hardest. And then I realized the importance of teamwork: we had to work closely. It was necessary to communicate with each child, making sure they understand what the instructor meant. I also had to learn to how to control the time and allocate some tasks for the children in order to achieve the purpose of teaching.” (#12)

4.2 College Students' Perception towards Poverty Issue and Education in China Rural and Mountain Areas

College students realized that poverty somehow had a strong connection with poor quality education or vice versa. For instance, there are 9 teachers in “D” primary school and only one of them had a bachelor’s degree. Compared with the advanced countries in Asia or other countries, the eligibility criteria here is still low (National Institute of Education Science , 2010) and it might indirectly reflect teachers’ attitude to children’s education .The lax attitude made it harder for teaching and it’s quite difficult for college students to communicate with the school equally. Poverty alleviation shall be both economic and humanitarian.

“Everyone has the right to get education. Equip our mind and brain make us stronger and that's the moment we don't need poverty alleviation support. We walk ourselves out of poverty!” (#2)

“It’s a very good direction that Macau SAR Government tried to support their education affairs. I think that cultivating the young generation will be the long-term helpful way. And it’s also crucial for the local teachers to learn more and do more for their own students” (#4)

“I think the kids should get more education, not only to get rid of poverty but also be more scientifically to protect their own precious culture!” (#9)

“I think the other way to invest in poverty alleviation is to set up a team of teachers to train the teachers in this rural and mountain areas in China. Only when the teachers get improved can they be educated out of poverty faster.” (#3)

4.3 Fostering the Sense of Commitment and Social Responsibility

Children’s ability of speaking Mandarin and desire of learning was better than expected. By taking care of every student in small groups, they were willing to communicate in Mandarin. The “D” school didn’t provide formal classes of arts, physical education and music until the College team came. Children proudly and happily asked their parents to join the celebration party. The principal highly praised the team’s contribution and hoped them to come again.

Moreover, in the investigation last July, the school paid more attention on the teaching subjects, but did not mention about the personal hygiene or moral education of children. It was found children in mountainous areas had serious colds in winter, and the long-term water shortage problem left much to be desired. Besides, children didn't have a good class order. They pushed each other and walked around during the meal, which indicated that the etiquette was needed to improve. Above all, the team members felt fulfilled but found more jobs and challenges, feeling obligated to do more. It was good to see 9 out of 13 members were committed to do the service again.

“You found you had some impact on other people, the kids, the teammates... from their reaction you started to think more about yourself. This was a powerful and meaningful experience” (#11)

“I spent lots of time thinking if it’s meaningful to do this service? Then I realized children might not grow that fast, they might not learn that much from me. However, I

am sure they were happy and felt the warmth from the society. They are loved. If we have more and more people get involved in, it will be a big success! ” (#8)

“Service-Learning may be more difficult than expected, but if we chose to join, we should do it with heart for that we may affect other person's life forever. No matter how difficult the road is, we must be unremitting.” (#3)

4.4 Service-Learning Was a Mutual Beneficial Learning Process

College students realized that Service-Learning is a two-way and reciprocal process. Unlike traditional volunteer projects or charity actions, Service-Learning programs contain designed learning plans, thorough preparation, structured reflection and concluding celebration. While providing services to the outside world, College students were also influenced by the children. The collision of different life experiences made students understand the importance of understanding and respect more clearly.

“Studying together was a wonderful moment. I like their childlike innocence, which was the beautiful nature of children and what I had been looking for a long time.” (#7)

“When we were coaching children one by one, I realized that everyone, no matter at what age or what kind of environment they grew up in, they did desire to be taken seriously. I have learned to understand others better and to consider from their perspectives which also increased my empathy during my very first time Service-Learning experience.” (#8)

“I quite agreed with the sentence, ‘during the service, what we learn might be always greater than what we served’. We went to the minority villages, experiencing different life styles and learned different cultures. I have learned a lot and I did hope the children too. ” (#6)

5. Conclusion

This study provided an overview of how university students from Macau took social responsibility in ethnic minority school of mountain area in China through Service-Learning project. The main purpose of this Service-Learning project was to enhance children's interest in learning so they were willing to continue to study. After the project, the main purposes had been achieved. Children showed interest in learning and

actively participated in class activities. College students got improved in teamwork, leadership and service skills. They felt connected to the community and two third of them made commitment to doing the service again next year. The institution acknowledged students' efforts and enthusiasm. Though it was an introductory Service-Learning experience for the College students and for the school, it showed that both sides benefited and learned a lot. This Service-Learning project would be carried out again and personal hygiene and manners should be taken into consideration as well in the near future.

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Biographical sketch of each presenter

Please send the biographical sketch of the presenters together with the proposal using the following format:

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- i. Last name followed by first name: Ching Hui, Lu
- ii. Position/department/organisation/country: Resident Fellow/Cheng Yu Tung College/ Macau, China
- iii. Short biography (word count should not exceed 70 words)

Ms. Lu received her master degree on Student Affairs of Higher Education in National Taiwan Normal University. She has been working as a resident fellow in University of Macau for more than 5 years. Ms. Lu conducts many leadership and service programs and Guizhou service-learning project was one of them. Before joining UM, she had worked in National Taiwan University for 7 years.

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Ms. Chen is a year-two undergraduate from University of Macau and majors in English education. She wants to become a teacher to help students get a better future. This was her first time doing Service-Learning program as a university student. She was in charge of arts courses and enjoyed the process of teaching and playing with them.

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Ms. Yang is a year-one undergraduate from University of Macau and majors in business administration. She used to do some volunteer services when she was in high school in mainland China. This was her first time doing Service-Learning program as a university student. She was in charge in Mandarin courses when she was in the service site.

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