Service-Learning and Community Partnerships: A Study of Hong Kong Secondary School Teachers

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Background of the Study

- Globally, service-learning is becoming an increasingly popular approach to achieving both the personal and academic goals of students and the broader goals of civic responsibility and social justice in communities.

- However, developing successful service-learning programs poses a variety of challenges (Cantor, 1995; Chisholm, 2002).

- In particular, despite reciprocity between schools and communities has been regarded as a key factor to the success of service-learning (Dorado & Giles, 2004), more research is needed to clarify the ways in which school-community partnerships can be fostered (Jacoby, 2003).

- Our study examines the service-learning experiences of frontline teachers to translate reciprocity into a sustainable design for actual partnerships.
Method

- In the autumn of 2008, five focus group interviews were conducted with 22 Hong Kong secondary school teachers to explore their views of school-community partnerships.
- The average length of their teaching experience: 11 years (range 1-20 years).
- All of them were actively involved in planning and implementing service-learning activities.
- An interview guide in the form of a series of general questions designed to elicit interviewees’ opinions on school-community partnerships, their inputs into such partnerships, and the effects of these inputs was used.
Results

- Identifying Appropriate Community Partners
  - Be conducted with the help of sponsoring bodies, teachers, students, alumni, and existing partners
  - Or aided by the active promotion strategies of community agencies

Kevin: To build partnerships, we establish social networks with NGOs by attending different kinds of seminars. Through these events, we can get to know different potential partners and then prepare a contact list for future service-learning activities.
Results

- Selecting Community Partners – School & Student Factors
  - Mission of the school
  - Student abilities/concerns
  - Range of service-learning options
  - Time constraints/scheduling difficulties

Paul: There is indeed a goal behind our collaboration with community agencies – we hope students’ horizons can be widened through their joining different kinds of service activities. A principal factor that we consider is whether the service activities suit the needs of students of different academic levels.
Results

- **Selecting Community Partners – Agency & Community Factors**
  - Share the beliefs of the school regarding service-learning
  - Be conveniently located and of guaranteed quality, and have an impressive history
  - Performance of the partner in previous collaborations

*Jane:* When choosing community partners, we choose those that can provide us with information on their past activities for **quality assurance**. By attending seminars organized by the agencies and reading their brochures and newsletters, we can understand and assess the service quality of the agency.
Results

Selecting Community Partners – Agency & Community Factors

- Consider those in the neighboring district
- If a neighboring district provides limited opportunities for community service, then the school should consider carrying out service activities in other districts

Mandy: Our first choice is a partner in our neighboring district. As most of our students live in the same district, they can get in touch with the people they serve and have a close relationship with them. We hope our students can understand the problems and needs of the community, so as to build up their sense of social commitment.

Carol: At the moment, our school mainly serves its district, but when there are needs in other districts, we will extend our service there.
Results

- Establishing and Sustaining Community Partnerships – Building Trust & Rapport with Common Goals and Complementary Roles
  - Clear and open communication between partners on how they see their own roles in the partnership and to what each side is able and willing to commit
  - Means: A mission statement, service priorities, and policies including administrative requirements, liability issues, and student performance evaluation

Laura: We hold meetings with community partners to let them understand the needs of our students so that an appropriate service-learning plan including student training, service process, leading of reflection, and demonstration of learning outcomes can be designed. All of these require discussion because our perspective, such as that on student activity safety standards, may be quite different from that of the partner

Justin: In service-learning collaboration, our partner is experienced in identifying needs and conducting services, while our teachers are familiar with curriculum arrangement and student concerns, so the inputs of the parties are complementary
Results

- Establishing and Sustaining Community Partnerships – Adhering to the Principle of Mutual Benefits & Shared Resources
  - Outcomes of service-learning benefit students and the community equally
  - Relationship is equitable regarding the contribution of resources including personnel, facilities, and time from both the school and the community agency

Henry: When we approach community agencies like a district center for senior citizens, we tell the staff there that what we are going to organize is a reciprocal service-learning activity. Our students will serve senior citizens through activities such as a computer class or an exercise group, whereas senior citizens will broaden the perspectives of our students by sharing their life experiences.
Results

- Establishing and Sustaining Community Partnerships – Ongoing Assessment and the Celebration of Successes
  - Students’ feedback on what they have learned from their service experiences
  - Community partners’ feedback on both student performance and the relevance of the service activities to the community
  - Subsequent follow-up is essential to ensure that the concerns of all parties are acted upon

Carmen: The performance of students is an important factor leading community partners to take the initiative to contact our school again for continued collaboration. What the partner admires are the smiles, preparation, and sincere attitude of the students
Results

- Establishing and Sustaining Community Partnerships – Ongoing Assessment & the Celebration of Successes
  - Service-learning partnerships require a great deal of preparation, energy, and follow-through to be successful
  - Celebration efforts help solidify school-community partnerships and provide evidence of work performed by the partners
  - May take many forms: participation certificates, website photo collages, special outings or activities, or celebratory banquets

Sharon: To promote the spirit of service-learning in our school and to deepen our partnerships with participating agencies, we present certificates and gifts to students and agencies respectively at our assembly, which usually consists of over 1,000 students and teachers. After the ceremony, there is a luncheon reception to thank collaborating agencies for their support, and to give agency staff the opportunity to talk with our students and teachers. Such meetings sometimes create new service-learning possibilities for other students in subsequent years
Discussion

- **Elements of an Effective School-Community Partnership**
  - A close match between the school’s objectives/intended student-learning outcomes & the community agency’s mission, activities, and timelines
  - **Organizational support**: Secure the support of school and agency administrators and to spread the work of the partnership throughout one’s own institution
  - Equitable distribution of tasks and resources among the involved partners
  - Regular dialogue throughout all aspects of the partnership process
Discussion

- **Interdependence, Mutual Recognition, and Partnership Transformation**
  - Mature and reciprocal partnerships are characterized by a transition from an egocentric pattern of appraising personal outcomes according to one’s own gains to a consideration of joint outcomes and a communal attitude that support mutual trust and a long-term perspective.
  - Such partnerships, mutually constructed and collaboratively implemented, hold the potential for cultivating civic relationships anchored in caring and respect, which is the aim of school-community partnerships in the context of service-learning.
Further Research

- Increase the generalizability of the study
- Examine the processes and outcomes of service-learning partnerships from the perspective of community partners
- Investigate alternative models in which such factors as the characteristics of service organizations are considered
- Conduct longitudinal study
Conclusion

- Our study provides information about ways to promote sustainable service-learning partnerships and suggests that fostering this kind of partnerships is an important and laudable goal for schools and community organizations.

- While more research is needed to assess its long-term benefits, we argue that service-learning has the capacity to transform lives, to touch the heart as well as the mind, and teach many valuable lessons beyond those provided within the confines of the classroom.
Thank You!