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Impact of Community Service Learning on the Social Skills of Students

Azmina Afzal
Education Consultant, USA
azminkot@hotmail.com

Nasreen Hussain
Institute of Business Management, Pakistan
nasreen.hussain@iobm.edu.pk

Abstract

Recently, many high schools and universities have promoted community service learning program by making it part of the admission process; therefore, students participate in community service learning program to get admission in an institution of their choice. Moreover, after completing the community service program, they see themselves as more socially responsible citizens. This qualitative study aimed to explore the impact of community service learning on the social skills of students. The study employed a qualitative method by randomly selecting twenty five male and female students for focused group interviews from five different O- level schools situated in a middle socio-economic locality. The results revealed that community service learning program has a positive impact on the social skills of O-level students. Besides, students had also a positive learning experience. The findings of the study indicated that the awareness to encourage community service in schools is grounded on the acceptance that it does not only give students extra credit points, but serving others or one's own community also makes them better citizens. Based on the advantages and positive experiences of students, the study recommends to include a more inclusive model of service learning in school curriculum.

Keywords: civic engagement, community service learning, social skills

NB: This article has been extracted from MPhil thesis written by the primary author.

Introduction

Community service learning programs in schools are experienced around the world in extensively diverse contexts (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Previous research suggests that learning through community service develops higher accountability to fulfill social responsibilities (Kolenko et al. 1996; Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006) and offers students a chance to grow into a civically engaged environment (Godfrey 1999; Rama et al. 2000). Such learning allows students to practice giving back to humanity at large, while it also supports classroom learning through experiential activities-community service being one of them (McCarthy & Tucker 1999). By integrating community service into the core curriculum, it provides students life skills that benefit the community and society as a whole. Besides, it also supports teachers to integrate education, learning and humanity (Andrews, 2007; Easterling & Rudell, 1997). Students become more active because of their participation in community service programs and educational organizations become involved with the community and start working towards solving societal issues.

The domains of community service learning, community work, civic engagement and voluntary or honorary work with society are becoming more current and famous topics of research studies recently and researchers and educationists have started to realize the importance and psychosocial requirements to give back to the community (Ferber 2007). The significance of community service or voluntary work related to how people communicate and recognize with others has been well-known (Chun & Akutsu 2003; Martin & Nakayama 2004). When specific situations or settings are established, letting individuals serve the society and work collectively with each other, prosocial behaviors progress more voluntarily, which expand the overall setting of other relationships in the community (Bond & Smith 1996). The present qualitative research proposes that better contact with diverse groups can decrease prejudice and conflicts, and it provides a platform to understand diversity and pluralism (Paolini et al. 2004; Pettigrew 1997). In our context very little research has been conducted on this topic. Probably, in our context community service learning is a new pedagogy at school level (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz 2011) or high school administrators of every school are not quite familiar with this approach, its benefits and possible educational outcomes.

The purpose of carrying out this research was to explore the impact of community service learning on the social skills of students. Thus, the research

question to guide the study was:

What is the impact of community service program on the social skills of students?

Literature Review

Kohlberg (1971) has defined community service learning as a vital element of social and civic development that forces students to confront social issues. He believes that when people engage in services for others with a new way of thinking, people may be persuaded into reasoning at higher levels by reorganizing the way they think about a given situation. Community service engagement at the school level has an informal, but a strong educational objective as it improves students' skills while they serve and enhance their social and civic consciousness. Community service learning can be a co-curricular activity or program as it is not mandatory. It is something students do apart from or in addition to their academic studies that plays a vital role in other developmental areas. Rest and Narvaez (1991) have acknowledged community service as a means of promoting social and moral development in the doers. Since the last two decades, community service learning programs have been used as an interesting pedagogy. One of the pedagogies of community service learning projects is youth mentorship programs and it is observed that youth mentoring has a positive impact on students where they have to teach the same age or below age students from the community. Jacoby (1996) opines it is the methodology and teaching technique that relates academic learnings and community service so that each supports the other in order to achieve educational goals. Community service learning plays an important role in developing social skills through building qualities of ethical and responsible citizens. In today's world, commercial agendas have influenced a lot of our educational institutions in goal setting; whereas in the past, the establishment of civic responsibility and its sense in students was one of the main objectives of public education institutions (Sears, 2003).

A broad and comparatively new discipline in educational psychology these days is evolutionary thinking (Buss, 2004). Evolutionary thinking defines the growth of prosocial behaviors essential in a group of people to participate in positive acts in order to confirm the existence of members within the group (Trivers, 1971). In this context, prosocial behavior can be seen in the form of community service through

a service learning project where people not only help others, but also appreciate others through the notion of pluralism.

An argument can be raised based on the above mentioned definition of community service that the purpose why community service resides a vital element among people is that we have progressed the dimensions and necessity to not only benefit from the amenities of others, but to provide those privileges to others in society. One concept that defines the popularity and success of community service is basically that of sympathy with others who need support, a notion that is generally referred to as ‘empathy’, where individuals who witness others in need of support feel intrinsically obliged to participate and communicate with them, contributing to them, providing support and assistance whenever possible (Penner et al. 2005). Hence, this notion is convincing for many evolutionary thinkers, who claim that early behaviors such as humanity and commitment towards community developed from need and at this moment offer the glue for the fabric of contemporary behavior. When students learn to help the community and have a prosocial behavior at the school level, it is most likely that they will continue this habit of serving others voluntarily in their later life as well. These initial behaviors have facilitated to shape group standards that are now visible in the social interface and prosocial actions of society nowadays (Buss, 2004).

Significance of Community Service Learning in Education

Previous researches have explored the significance of community service learning within the community and how people need to feel associated with society by providing specific skills to others (Adler, 1964; Lisman, 1998). Research has also shown the significance of community service in connection to moral values and the development of social skills (Boss, 1994). Adler (1964) describes the importance of volunteering with others for the common good of the community. As a collective society, citizens need to remind themselves to participate in prosocial behaviors for the shared good.

Educational institutions have usually prepared students for the demands of the world by stressing critical thinking and social responsibility and the importance of contributing to the community and social activities. This notion supports John Dewey’s (1937) stance, a pioneer in higher education that the responsibility of all societies is to provide equal opportunity for educational advancement to everyone.

He believes that all individuals within a society have a responsibility to act in socially responsible ways and to participate in critical thinking that will improve the overall quality of human interaction. It is believed that the overall quality of human interaction can be improved through inculcating social skills that can be developed through childhood and nourished by helping others. To help others voluntarily, leads people towards engagement in community service (Dewey, 1916).

Overall Impact of Community Service Learning on Students' Social Skills

Social skills of society and civic accountability are defined as the energetic involvement of an individual in a community (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2004). Buss (2004) reiterates that decent character and excellent social skills should be the primary concern of every educational system. We should produce ethical human beings before our students become skilled professionals. Therefore, nurturing social skills, building personality and learning of ethical, moral and social values are considered as the primary purpose of teaching and learning process and are also stressed by many educationists like Dewey. Education is also recognized as a moral and social activity by some authors who are not educationist (Rocheleau, 2004). The school administrators are now reviewing the teaching of social skills in schools because it seems that deterioration of social skills and values in students are prevailing at a high level. School misbehaviors, misconducts and bunking of classes have compelled school management to rethink about changing the culture of schools. Developing social skills, character building and teaching code of conduct are incorporated into the school environment and community in order to help students to be committed while learning, to become good citizens, to deal with conflicts and to engage in community with active participation by fulfilling social responsibilities (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2004).

Community service learning is not a new notion, and the practice of acquiring and serving comes from the conventional models of Aristotle and Plato. These models promote education as a medium of creating good citizens, provide them with knowledge and wisdom both in order to pursue good deeds by achieving the set goals (Rocheleau, 2004). Therefore, if we want to develop our society on educational grounds, then we must select a model that emphasis on inculcating a sense of social responsibility in the students leading to an enlightened educational system through promoting sound social skills, where civic accountability is a prime goal.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of community service learning program on the social skills of O-Level students. The qualitative research method was applied to carry out the research study. In order to develop an understanding of the importance of community service learning, exploration had to be carried out in the natural setting, for example, with the students who participated in community service learning program and the real beneficiaries of the program.

The procedure for this research study was collecting data, coding the qualitative data in order to identify themes, then integrating and analyzing the qualitative data at several stages of the research study. This study design was used to understand and comprehend the research problem in detail and in a complete way. In qualitative research, the researchers engage themselves in gaining rich insights about the phenomenon under investigation in a natural setting including among others, understanding feelings and analyzing words and where a researcher conducts a research study in a natural setting (Creswell, 2003) which means based on constructivist approach the researcher or investigator makes knowledge claims. The data was explored by extracting themes through domain analysis from the transcribed interviews as Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) consider domain analysis as a way of unfolding huge data in a summarized manner. According to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000), “A domain analysis involves grouping together items and units into related clusters, themes and patterns, a domain being a category which contains several other categories” (p. 203).

Participants

The sample comprised five O-Level privately run schools situated in an average socio-economic vicinity of Karachi, Pakistan. Twenty students (girls and boys both 15-17 years old) from grade IX-XI who experienced community service learning program were randomly selected from every school and were requested after signing the consent form to participate in the research study. The researcher used a random sampling method because the nature of the population was defined and the researcher wanted to give all the students who participated in the voluntary service program an equal chance of selection for an interview. Also, random selection process removes biasness from the selection procedure.

The researcher interviewed students who had participated in community service programs. The researcher conducted site visits to five O-Level schools where students were allowed to volunteer their services. At each O-Level school, the researcher interviewed a minimum of five students in a focus group through a random selection process. These students were randomly divided in the group of five. The focus group interview was guided by a semi-structured interview, tape recorded, and later transcribed. The volunteer students focus group interviews gathered information about their experience, learning, and perception about community service programs and the parent school students focus group interview gathered data about how the beneficiaries students interpreted the community service experience.

The students were interviewed to examine and investigate their experiences of community service learning program after taking the consent from the school principal. Through a semi-structured interview protocol, the students were interviewed using five open ended questions which were recorded and then transcribed for developing a thematic analysis to understand the data. The data were analyzed through manual thematic analysis where the interviews were first transcribed, then the transcriptions were coded and themes were extracted from the interviews. To analyze the data in depth, an inductive approach and systematic procedure were adopted by assigning the coding categories to the verbatim data. The codes were derived from the interview transcripts after reading and re-reading the notes in order to allow the themes to emerge from the raw data.

Findings and Discussion

In order to answer the research questions and complete the research study, it is essential to analyze the data thoroughly that is collected during the study. This section presents the findings of the study as gleaned from the results of the research using a qualitative method. The findings were derived using a qualitative data analysis technique that is based on the thematic analysis of interviews. The section also examines the key results in relation to the intended research question, which is the base of this research study.

Currently, community service learning is being used to define an extensive array of pragmatic learning activities from volunteer service ventures to field studies and practicum and it takes place when there is a distinct equilibrium between

learning and service outcomes (Furco, 1996). One more aspect of community service learning is the exchange of benefit between the volunteers and the recipient (Gomez, 1999). It is a program in which students without material compensation accomplish service with the intention to benefit the community. Sometimes it is non-curriculum based; compulsory or voluntary, does not generally include distinct learning goals and may have activities that take place in school or outside school.

An in-depth picture can be drawn upon how students perceived the community service learning program and what motivated them to participate in it through qualitative data analysis. For that reason, thematic analysis was used to explore the understanding of the participants' responses.

These findings also imitate a number of studies using different tools, research samples and methodologies. Astin and Sax (1998, 2004) found in their research study that community service learning is advantageous for students in both short and the long term. Students who willingly contribute to community service learning programs may gain several benefits, including enhanced social skills, community consciousness and a desire to help others (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Community service learning programs engage students in an organized service that addresses community needs while improving the students' educational skills and civic commitment.

Voluntary Activities Performed by the Students

The volunteer students were engaged in teaching general lessons and concepts to the children of the recipient schools along with conducting motivational sessions and playing sports with them.

Interviews (Volunteer Students)

Community service learning as a source of self-satisfaction. This theme includes students' perceptions about the community service experience. Students were certain that it gives them self-satisfaction and real life experiences that enable them to learn many things, for example how to work with their class fellows, how to manage time for voluntary work and their studies, how to teach others, how to help others and above all to do something for humanity. Both the genders had almost the same views while defining community service learning.

This theme revealed that students experienced community service learning as a source of self-satisfaction, which also improves their relationships with their peers and with recipients. Students discussed how these interactions impacted on their personality. This theme involved various outcomes identified by the research participants. Throughout the interview, it was observed that the participants expressed their views clearly by sharing their experiences.

Student Excerpts

Increased sense of social responsibility. The most shared community service learning outcome identified by the majority of the students in the focus group interviews was an increased sense of social responsibility. This feeling was coupled with a keen sense of responsibility and a very important social skill, demonstrated in the following quote by one of the research participants:

“From the community service learning program, I learned about how to help others, through leadership...and also responsibilities of a good citizen. I realize that even one person like me can really make a difference.”

As the above extract illustrates, students discovered high self-esteem and the feeling that a socially responsible person can make a big difference. The students reported that the community service learning experience supported their values, which sometimes also translated into an improved sense of responsibility. Another change that students identified as a result from community service experience was increased student awareness of the people around them and about society. Similar outcomes are reported in the research study done by Astin and Sax (1998) that many students discussed how community service impacted the way that they observed needy people of their society, which helped them re-evaluate their previous beliefs. One student stated:

“The important thing that I learned was what it is really like to be less privileged. When you come to know the reality of something, you behave in a different way because you try to understand others from their perspective.”

Another student shared a very interesting point. He said:

“At school we are pampered by our teachers, but when we go for community service, we realize how difficult it is to pamper others.”

One more outcome of the community service learning that students identified in the focus group interviews was improved awareness of social skills and value change. Both the genders had similar opinion about learning social skills from the program to make them responsible citizens. One boy, for example, spoke of how the community service experience influenced his approach towards understanding social skills and volunteering, as this statement illuminates:

“I think this experience made a really big change in my attitude towards understanding social skills... I learnt how to respect others.... Then from that, it just inspired me to be good with every one, help others and I should volunteer more and count it as my moral duty.”

For one student, participating in the community service program helped her to become more responsible, and for that, she appreciated the school efforts and remarked:

“I have time for it and I can do it.... I am very happy that my school organizes such programs otherwise I would have not taken this initiative myself...really it helped me to socialize and also to be responsible.... I had an amazing experience...”

Awareness of future avenues. In one of the focus group interviews, student responses made the researcher think deeply and focus on the benefits of service program as one of the students shared:

“After completing this service program I have decided that now I will study sociology so I can know more about society.”

Another student agreed with this opinion and discussed how community service caused him to think about the possible career options he might make. He

shared how this amazing experience exposed him to the awareness of working for a non-profit organization. He stated:

“This experience turned on the light that I had never seen... The non-profit agency... where we can work for others... and make a difference in our society.”

Some of them felt that this experience gave them the chance to determine something they might want to do in the future, while other students denied this and said that this experience simply gave them awareness about service oriented fields.

Increased level of engagement. Overall, the majority of students shared that community service engages us in useful tasks. As one of them enthusiastically acknowledged:

“Initially I didn’t like this program... it was hectic for me... but when I started this journey time, it passed so fast and we worked so much without thinking about our tiredness.... Now I have started going for community service every weekend.”

Another student exclaimed:

“We were keenly involved in something rather than sitting in our regular classrooms.”

Community service learning and academic skills. A question was asked to the group if they thought this experience helped them to improve their academic skills. Some students stated that there is a connection between community service and academics. A student confirmed:

“Whatever we learn in classroom, we get a chance to teach others; by this we also understand many things and we also get an opportunity to understand our community issues.”

Some students felt that the community service experience offers an avenue to apply the theories that they had learnt in the schools on practical grounds. One student said:

“Participating in community service learning is just like a putting ‘theories into practice.’”

However, some of them said that their level is different from the level of the students to whom they teach; therefore, they are not learning anything new instead they were getting an opportunity to review their own concepts.

Awareness of social issues. Students repetitively provided examples of how involvement in a community service program increased their consciousness of problems in the community. Few students said that they stereotyped beliefs about the students they would come across, but during the service, they were able to see the reality that they had never imagined previously. One student informed:

“Those kids really need our help, they don’t have sufficient basic necessities of lives that we take for granted.... Now we are able to understand the challenges that those students have in life, for example, absolute poverty, low profile life....”

The interviews with volunteer students also enabled the researcher to understand that community service learning can help students to breakdown stereotypes and to realize that before making judgments, one should look for further information and reality. One student reported that she used to consider needy people having low moral values, but now she is able to perceive and realize reasons behind those low moral values.

The students’ responses suggest that once they understand others, they can improve their social skills too. According to one student:

“The community service program itself was interesting and rewarding for me... working with others made me more humble and more helpful.”

This study revealed that students perceive community service as an important activity; it helped them to improve their social skills, made them socially responsible, enabled them to understand diversity, and understood societal issues. In addition, few students of the focus group interview stated that community service helped them clear their concepts that they had learnt in their classes. On the other hand, recipients also learnt from this program by enjoying their studies and developed a strong bond with other volunteers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A community service learning program is based on community service in which sometimes service is incorporated into academic outcomes or in co-curricular activities. Despite some significant dissimilarity between service learning and community service, this literature review did not differentiate between them, since the terms are frequently used interchangeably. Besides, community service learning participants improve basic social and citizenship skills, for instance, the capability to express feelings, ability to understand issues of community, develop leadership skills, etc. (Gomez, 1999).

Since different theorists and researchers of the same field have different views of what community service learning is in reality, the researchers explaining in this study, community service learning as any voluntary or unpaid community service that is mainly dedicated to improving the situation of the community. Community service activities are planned under the supervision of school administrations or adults who help students to become socially sound and who educate and train other members of the community, who work in a more or less some way to develop the society and improve the environment and living conditions of the society.

The findings and results of the research study suggest that community service learning increases student insights of the importance of community work, understanding of diversity, social skills as well as a sense of responsibility.

It is recommended that community service learning should be part of school curriculum instead of having this activity as an option. Curriculum setters and school administration should design an integrated program for it. Besides, parents' involvement should be made mandatory and once school finishes this project,

students should be asked to continue engaging themselves in community service learning independently.

For future studies, longitudinal effects of community service learning can be studied. For example, researchers have not yet studied that changes in attitudes after completing community service program. A long term effective study may help the volunteers to understand its impact on the entire society in the long run. The era in which we live in is the era of self-centeredness and egoistic behaviors, where everyone seems to be running after materialistic goals and self-benefits. In such a fast paced world, the importance of helping others and community work can be a motivating factor for individuals to realize their role in the society. Further research on the same paradigm can help educationists and school administrators to make community service program a mandatory part of their curriculum, not only at higher level, but from the elementary level.

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