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Investigating student outcomes from a service learning project

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Investigating Student Outcomes from a Service Learning Project

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from the

University of Wollongong

Faculty of Education

by

Shona Gibson
B. Teach (dist), M. Ed (Research)
Certification

I, Shona Gibson, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other university or academic institution.
Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the outcomes of a group of 15 and 16 year old school students who participated in a service learning project, referred to as the ‘Adopt a School’ project. This study was undertaken to understand what effect the project had on these students, and how it impacted on them as people. This study focused on the experiences these students had during their field trip in Sri Lanka in September 2005.

A qualitative methodology incorporating the grounded theory was selected to analyse the data.

The study identified that service learning engagement provides powerful and deep learning experiences which encourage students to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes and relationships with others, especially on their life as teenagers in Australia and, as a result, what they had come to take for granted or have not questioned.

A core finding from this study was that service learning involvement promoted identity formation. Immersion in the host community facilitated new and more complex thinking about their personal and social identities, the construction of identity in relation to serving others, and the kinds of commitments participants wanted to make in their lives. Because students were introduced to and developed relationships with, individuals and experiences with which they were unfamiliar, previously held notions of self and other were challenged, and reconstructed. Implications for education have been drawn from the results of this study.
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Definition of Terms

Adopt a School

‘Adopt a School’ refers to a project linking Presbyterian Ladies’ College (PLC) Sydney with three tsunami affected schools in Sri Lanka.

The ‘Adopt a School’ project is aimed at providing the students involved with an ‘immeasurable opportunity for personal growth as they make contributions as responsible global citizens’ (Brewer, 2005).

AdoptSriLanka

AdoptSriLanka is an organisation helping villagers along Sri Lanka’s southern coast, following the tsunami on December 26, 2004. The organisation comprises Sri Lankans and expatriates with intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground. They are all volunteers. (Brewer, 2005)

Experience

This term reflects Dewey’s definition of experience. Dewey argued that educative experiences could be judged by whether or not the individual grew, or would grow, intellectually and morally, the larger community benefited from the learning over the long haul, the ‘situation’ (Dewey, 1916) resulted in conditions leading to further growth, such as arousing curiosity and strengthening initiative, desire and purpose.

HSC

The Higher School Certificate (HSC) is a locally, nationally and internationally recognised qualification for students who successfully complete secondary education in New South Wales (NSW) Australia.

Non-government, Independent, and Private Schools

Non-government schools are defined as schools that are ‘founded and wholly organised by individuals or non-government bodies’ (Grimshaw, 2002, p. 18). These
schools are ‘self-managed by their own board of governors, hence the use of the term independent’ (Daniels, 2003, p.3). These schools, despite government funding since the 1960s, have also been tagged ‘private’ (Meadmore, 2004).

Outcomes

Outcomes are intended and unintended consequences of a project, usually in the context of knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, behaviour, condition or status concerning the project’s participants (Mark, Henry and Julnes, 2000).

PLC Sydney

The Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) Sydney is a non-government day and boarding school of girls from Reception to Year 12. It offers an academic curriculum underpinned by ‘Christian values that encourage the pursuit of excellence in all areas of life’ (PLC, website, 2005).

Service Learning

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience and strengthen communities.

Year 11

The NSW school education system is structured into five educative groupings: Pre-school, Infants school, Primary school, Secondary school and Tertiary studies. The school groups are further identified by ‘Year’ labels, concluding with Year 12, the last year of secondary school, which requires the students to undertake a formal externally prepared examination. The participants in this study were in Year 11 at PLC.