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Investigating student outcomes from a service learning project

Shona Gibson
University of Wollongong

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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.

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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.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	viii
List of Appendix	ix
Definition of Terms	x

Chapter One: Introduction to This Study	1
Introduction	1
Background of this Study	1
Purpose, Goal and Significance of This Study	3
The Review of Literature	5
Theoretical Framework	5
The Participants' Service Learning Program	5
Scope of the Study	6
Organisation of This Thesis	7
Chapter Summary	8
 Chapter Two: Literature Review	 9
Introduction	9
 Part One	 10
Distinction Between Four Service Related Terms	10
 Part Two	 14
Setting the Scene: Historical Events in Australian Education Leading to Service in Education	14
 Part Three	 17
Theoretical Background that Underpins Service Learning	17
Experiential Based Learning	17
The Development of Service Learning	21
Service Learning a Socialisation Process	23
Service Learning Does Not Occur in Isolation	24
Models of Service Learning	26
Reflective Practice a Component of Service Learning	28
Reflective Practice in Service Learning Programs	29
Reported Outcomes of Service Learning	31
Why People Participate in Service Learning	34
Service Learning's Potential in Enhancing Australian Education	35
Summary	36
 Part Four	 36
Field, Paradigm, Analysis	36
Qualitative Research	36
An Overview of the Origin, Theoretical Development, and Use of Grounded Theory	39
Grounded Theory Methodology	40
Critiques	42
Review of Prominent Authors in the Field of Grounded Theory	44
Glaser and Strauss	45
Glaser	46
Martin and Turner	46
Strauss and Corbin	47

Charmaz	47
Grounded Theory: An Exploration of Educational Issues	47
Chapter Summary	49
 Chapter Three: The Research Approach	 50
Introduction	50
Study Design	51
Research Questions	51
Qualitative, Quantitative Research Approaches	51
Grounded Theory Methodology	52
Overview of the Methods of Data Collection	53
Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness	55
Triangulation	55
Thick Description	56
The Research Participants	57
Ethical Clearance	58
How Data Were Collected	59
Interviews	59
Email Correspondence	60
Observations	61
Documents Supplementary Data	61
Researcher's Journal	62
Field Notes	62
Data Analysis	63
Phases of the Study	63
 Phase One	 63
Phase One – Data Analysis	65
Phase One – Preliminary Coding	66
Phase One – Codes, Themes and Categories	68
 Phase Two	 69
Phase Two – Preliminary Coding	71
Phase Two – Refining Codes into Themes	72
 Phase Three	 73
Phase Three – Coding to Themes: The Final Analysis	75
Development of a Core Category	78
Chapter Summary	78
 Chapter Four: Results of the Study	 79
Introduction	79
Part A: Portrait of PLC, a Snap shot of the Adopt a School project and a	80
Profile of the Participants	
PLC Sydney's Foundation and Current Form	80
The School I Saw: On One Visit	81
Manifestation of PLC Sydney's Culture	84
The 'Adopt a School' Service Learning Project	85

Background to the Project	85
How the Project was Formed	85
Developing the ‘Adopt a School’ Project	86
Reflective Journal	88
Principles’ of ‘Adopt a School’ Project	88
While In Sri Lanka	89
Profiling the Participants	91
Part A: Summary	93
Part B: The Outcomes for the Students	94
Introduction	96
The Core Category - Identity Formation	97
Seeing a Whole New World	103
Knowledge Development and Application	111
Reflective Experiences	122
Relationships	131
Emotional Development	141
Chapter Summary	146
Chapter Five: Discussion	147
Introduction	147
Identity Formation	148
Seeing a Whole New World	150
Knowledge Development and Application	151
Reflective Experiences	154
Relationships	156
Emotional Development	157
Chapter Summary	159
Chapter Six: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations	160
Introduction	160
Scrutiny of Aspects of Their Lives	161
Implication	162
Increased Acceptance of New People	163
Implication	163
Increased Acceptance of New Ideas and Experiences	164
Implication	165
Open-Mindedness Extended Beyond the Project	165
Implication	166
Teachers as Facilitators	166
Implication	167
Recommendations	167
The Researcher’s Final Reflections	169
What have I learned?	169
Conclusion	170
References	171

List of Figures

Figure 2:1	Map of the Literature Review	9
Figure 2:2	Adaptation of Henry's (1989) Meaning and Practice in Experiential Learning Model	20
Figure 2:3	Adaptation of Morton's Model of the Paradigms of Service Learning Involvement	27
Figure 3:1	Organisational Framework for Chapter Three	50
Figure 3:2	Three Phase Design	53
Figure 3:3	Summaries of the Timeframe and Types of Data Collection Methods	54
Figure 3:4	Triangulation Process	55
Figure 3:5	Ensuring Trustworthiness: Ensuring Student Voice	56
Figure 3:6	Phase One Open Coding Sample	66
Figure 3:7	Phase One Interview Open Code Matrix : A Sample	67
Figure 3:8	Developing Codes into Themes	73
Figure 3:9	E-mail Interview: An Example	75
Figure 3:10	'Adopt a School' Service Learning Projects' Conceptual Map	77
Figure 4:1	Concept Map of the Grounded Theory Categories	96

List of Tables

Table 2:1	Synthesis of Definitions and Examples of Service Related Terms	13
Table 2:2	Predisposition of Qualitative Mode of Inquiry	39
Table 2:3	Evolution of Grounded Theory: Adapted of Charmaz (2000, 2002) and Kriflik (2005) Reviews	44
Table 4:1	Manifestations of PLC's School Culture	84
Table 4:2	Student-Participant Information	93
Table 4:3	Staff Information	94
Table 4:4	Parent Information	94

List of Appendix

Appendix 1	Principal's Information Sheet
Appendix 2	Teacher's Information Sheet
Appendix 3	Student's Information Sheet
Appendix 4	Parent's Information Sheet
Appendix 5	Research Participant Information Package: Student Consent
Appendix 6	Consent Form for Students
Appendix 7	Consent Form for Parent of Student
Appendix 8	Consent Form for Teacher
Appendix 9	Profile Question for Student Participants
Appendix 10	Profile Question for Teachers
Appendix 11	Examples Research Questions Asked of Teachers
Appendix 12	Examples Research Questions Asked of Students
Appendix 13	Comparison of Qualitative Strategies to Determine Their Fit to this Study
Appendix 14	Combined Phase One and Two Codes
Appendix 15	Combined Phase One and Two Codes Emergent Themes
Appendix 16	The Model Used to Explain the Developing Theory

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.