The Impact of Community Engagement Within a Learning Community on Students' Positive Development

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Abstract

Positive youth development recognizes the importance of addressing students' broader developmental needs through community engagement and empowering experiences with adults. This paper reports on a project involving secondary school students' engagement in an intergenerational learning community, alongside university students and older adults. Students were empowered to take an active role in planning and implementing a series of activities while being mentored by university students. The project which lasted for two years incorporated service learning and two cycles of action learning. This paper is on the second cycle. A total of 151 students from eight schools took part in this cycle and their feedback was collected through a questionnaire survey and focus group interviews. Results showed that students developed a better understanding of others and were able to learn from and work with other participants in the community. Moreover, they indicated improved self-reflection, enhanced organizational skills, and a strong sense of community engagement. The focus group interviews further attested to the positive impact of the project on students' personal growth. Apart from acquiring knowledge and transferable skills, students felt empowered and demonstrated changes in values and attitudes towards others and the community. These findings highlight the significance of involving students in learning experiences within the community and providing them with opportunities to undertake leadership roles in safe and supportive environments. This project underscores the importance of fostering community engagement among students and creating learning environments that facilitate their holistic growth.

Keywords: Positive Youth Development, Learning Community, Action Learning, Service Learning, Secondary School Students, Hong Kong

Introduction

Positive youth development recognizes the significance of providing adolescents with opportunities for learning and engagement with others in their community (Conway, Heary & Hogan, 2015, Geldhof et al., 2014). Effective positive youth development programs involve positive and sustained adult-youth relationships in the form of mentoring, provision of activities that focus on the development of a range of life skills including cognitive, behavioral, and social relational skills, and providing opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of valued activities in family, school, and the community (Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020; Ettekal & Agans, 2020). Important elements of positive youth development also include the provision of opportunities for students' learning and engagement with others in their community and the need for structured activities (Conway, Heary & Hogan, 2015; Geldhof et al., 2014; Ettekal & Agans, 2020).

This paper presents a project that sought to promote positive development among secondary school students through the implementation of a program based on an intergenerational learning community model. The program involved collaboration between secondary school students, university students, and older adults, integrating elements of positive youth development. The concept of a learning community has gained significant recognition in promoting student development by facilitating connection, inclusion, and empowerment through collaborative processes (Hord, 2004; Mitchell & Sackey, 2011). The intergenerational learning community served as a platform for positive student development by providing a secure environment and supportive conditions. Several features that maximize positive youth development have been utilized within this learning community. These include establishing nurturing relationships, cultivating a sense of belonging, promoting positive social norms, encouraging autonomy, and developing a wide range of interpersonal and life skills (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The intergenerational learning community was validated through previous studies which provided insight into its structure and operation (Sivan et al., 2016a, 2016b).

To effectively cultivate students' development of life skills and enhance their community engagement, service learning and action learning approaches (Howard, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001) have been incorporated into the learning community practice. Service learning emphasizes authentic community issues, collaboration, and mutual benefits for both the provider and recipient, with equal focus on service and learning (Furco, 2011; Hacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014). Several recommendations have been made to best utilize service learning skills. These include involvement of students in activity planning, implementation, and assessment, incorporating reflective processes with higher-level thinking skills, and collaboration with community organizations for professional support in designing and implementing the activities (Billing, 2000; Hacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014). In the present project involving university students, older adults, and secondary school students, ample opportunities for collaboration, mutual learning, and deep reflection were provided. Secondary school students received mentorship from university students and community members, assuming leadership roles to serve and learn with reflection and reciprocity. They developed and implemented intergenerational learning activities, interacting directly with older adults in community centers to facilitate mutual learning and empowerment.

Action learning involves active learning, problem-solving, and systematic inquiry through ongoing reflection to drive changes and improvements. It utilizes collaborative inquiry and ongoing reflection to enhance social situations for the participants and those affected by its

outcomes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). The successful application of the action learning approach has been observed among academics and school teachers in Hong Kong, leading to pedagogical enhancements and improved student learning through reflection (Sivan & Chan, 2014). In this project, the principles of action learning were incorporated, guiding students through the four phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Previous studies conducted among higher education students have indicated that students' involvement in service learning and action learning enhanced their learning and contributed to their personal growth (Sivan et al., 2016a). The present project expanded on these investigations with an emphasis on secondary school students.

The project took place in Hong Kong where there has been an increasing emphasis in secondary schools on expanding students' learning beyond traditional classroom settings to their community. As part of the school curriculum, students participate in Other Learning Experiences (OLE) and Life-wide Learning where they engage in real contexts and authentic settings for their whole person development (Education Bureau, 2024). The project aimed to enhance secondary school students' positive development through active participation in the intergenerational learning community which incorporates mentoring, life-skill-building activities and opportunities for students' contribution and leadership.

The project consisted of two action learning cycles, with this paper focusing on the second cycle. It involved six types of activities: an induction event, visits to community centers, joint meetings, implementation of activities, reflection sessions, and a consolidation event. The induction event established connections among secondary school students, teachers, university students, and community center representatives. Visits to community centers strengthened relationships and familiarized students with the context and the people they served. Joint meetings between secondary and university students facilitated guidance and support, as university students acted as mentors. Sixteen activities addressing healthy living and well-being were implemented by secondary school students with university students' assistance. Twelve reflection sessions allowed for self-assessment and learning. The consolidation event marked the cycle's conclusion, providing an opportunity to share achievements and celebrate outcomes. This paper presents the results of the study conducted on the second action learning cycle, highlighting the significance of collaboration and community engagement in fostering positive development among secondary school students.

Methods

Research Design
The study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Both questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the second action research cycle.

Sample
The sample consisted of students ($N=151$) from eight secondary schools who participated in a series of activities as members of an intergenerational learning community involving university students and staff, and older adults from the community. Students were invited to participate through their schools as part of their Other Learning Experiences (OLE).

Questionnaires. A 10-item questionnaire was designed and administered to the sample. The questionnaire included statements related to students' affective and cognitive learning, social engagement, self-reflection, organizational skills and understanding of older adults. Each

item was rated by the respondents on a five–point level of agreement with each item ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire is 0.955 demonstrating strong internal consistency reliability.

Focus Group Interview. Twelve focus group interviews were conducted. Each group comprised four to seven students. Students were asked to describe their experiences as members of the learning community and share what they learned from these experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by a trained researcher. All interviews were audiotaped with respondents' consent.

Results

The data collected through questionnaire surveys were analyzed using IBM SPSS, with a focus on descriptive analysis. Overall, the students' evaluation of the project was highly positive, as reflected by their strong agreement with the items. Mean scores ranged from 3.82 to 4.08. Students reported significant learning from their collaboration with other community participants, along with improvements in self-reflection and organizational skills. They also developed a strong sense of community engagement, a willingness to serve, and a deeper understanding of older adults. In general, students expressed satisfaction with their learning experiences in the community.

The qualitative data obtained from the focus group interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis revealed the emergence of four dominant themes: feeling empowered, respected, and recognized; developing transferable skills; gaining knowledge and understanding of others; and undergoing changes in values and attitudes. Furthermore, within the theme of skill development, four distinct sub-themes were identified including the enhancement of communication skills, fostering the ability to work in a team, cultivating organization and time management skills, and nurturing leadership skills. Corresponding quotations supporting these sub-themes are presented in Table 1.

Themes	Quotations
Enhancement of communication skills	1) "The project nurtured our planning and communication skills. I got the chance to talk, to plan and to discuss with many different people. I became more patient after participating in the project. The project is not only about studying, as you can only go that far with mere studying. We can experience a range of other different things. (I1, S1)
	2) "I would have not taken the initiatives to talk to older adults but this time I learnt how to be more engaged and patient and I proactively talked to them. This is my favorite part: learning to communicate with older adults. I also learned how to team up with people from different backgrounds, like the university students and the project team." (I6, S2)

Fostering the ability to work in a team	1) "I think it is really important to work as a team. We spent much time thinking about what activities we should organize for the older adults. We had different opinions but despite the differences, we found our common grounds and worked together to come up with a plan that each and everyone agreed on. It is a great training of team spirit." (I3, S10)
Cultivating organization and time management skills	1) "The project helped me to improve my organizational skills. I want to be a kindergarten teacher and what I need to do in the future, perhaps, is to organize activities for the kids. Although I was planning activities for older adults this time, I learned that activities should be designed based on the needs of the participants. The participants' characteristics, interests and abilities should also be considered." (I5, S2)
	2) "I have learned time management. The activity should be more concise. If we really want to do more, we should manage the time better. It is also important to thoroughly discuss our ideas with teammates from other schools since they suggest different activities and ideas, it is important that we are all on the same page." (I3, S11)
Nurturing leadership skills	1) "I have learned to be a leader. I have never got a chance to take the lead. I did not think I can be a leader. The experience of the project proved me wrong. I could give my opinion eloquently to the team. I can work with new people who do not belong to my school. I could spot what was needed to be done to improve. What I have learnt is about what I am capable of." (I6, S1)
	2) "I got better communication and leadership skills. We had to speak up when we planned for our activities. There was a time when my groupmates had no ideas, and I voiced out mine and eventually got their approval and recognition. I really feel so good about it. I feel like I am actually pretty good and creative. I tried to be more assertive and courageous when sharing my opinion in our School-Based Assessment activities, instead of looking down on myself as if I am not confident." (I1, S1).

Table 1: Themes and corresponding students' quotations

Conclusion

This paper examined the impact of active participation by secondary school students in an intergenerational learning community that incorporates mentoring, life-skill-building

activities, and opportunities for students' contribution and leadership. The study's findings indicate that students developed personal and social skills, as well as positive values, through their engagement as active members of the learning community. The positive outcomes of the study affirm the importance of maintaining ongoing adult-youth relationships, as demonstrated through the mentoring process experienced with university students throughout all stages of the project. Furthermore, the results highlight the significance of providing activities that facilitate the development of a wide range of life skills, including communication, time management, organization, and teamwork.

Students' accounts and their sharing of concrete examples further illustrate that the opportunities given to them to take the lead in activities greatly facilitated their contribution to the community and the development of their leadership skills. In addition to these substantial contributions to students' positive development, there was also a notable shift in their values and attitudes towards others in their community, particularly older adults, and an increased willingness to continue making contributions. Moreover, students reported feeling empowered and recognized for their efforts and contributions, which enhanced their self-confidence and potentially motivated them to sustain their positive engagement in the community. Based on the study's results, it is recommended to provide students with opportunities to actively engage in their community while creating a safe and supportive environment that fosters their holistic and positive development.

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