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Junior high school students' perceptions of service learning for admission to high school

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Abstract

The Twelve-Year Basic Education Program in Taiwan tries to shift the test-centered pedagogy to a more holistic-education one by including service learning in the 'excess application sequencing score' which determine students' order to be recruited by high schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how students perceive service learning in this new policy. Six ninth graders from a complete high school were interviewed with six questions in the study. Though students were pushed to do their service learning, the results show they did learn something and even enjoy their service experiences, which preliminarily indicates that effort to implement this new policy is worthwhile. Related recommendations are proposed for the government, schools, teachers, and parents. Further studies are necessary to evaluate this new policy by data from more comprehensive sources.

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1. Introduction

Taiwan has undergone some major education reforms in the last two decades. One of the major purposes of these education reforms is to shift the test-centered pedagogy to a more holistic-education one. Starting from April 10th in 1994, there are a lot of important changes in Taiwan's education system, like establishing more high schools and universities, launching of multi-optional admission system for high schools and universities, and launching of *nine-year integrated curriculum* for compulsory education. Following these reform actions is another major change that is in progress - the Twelve-Year Basic Education Program.

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One of the most significant features of the Twelve-Year Basic Education Program is the open-admissions system, which means that students do not have to take entrance exams to apply for high schools like what have been done during the past decades. In the past, the test-centered admission system was criticized for inflicting too much pressure on students who need to spend a lot of time studying for tests to enter the best schools. The open-admissions system takes service learning into consideration when there are more than desired number of students applying for a certain high school. It encourages junior high school students to fulfill six hours of service learning each semester so that they can earn points in the service learning item of the *excess application sequencing score*. For the year 2014, the full score is three points, which means that students need to do the service learning for three semesters. The *excess application sequencing score* determines the recruiting order of each student when the number of applicants exceeds the quota of recruiting. This new policy, in hopes of helping students develop altruism and social responsibility, is designed to modify the traditional test-centered admission policy which was considered to be harmful for narrowing down education to mere test preparation. The present study aims at understanding junior high school students' perceptions of service learning in Twelve-Year Basic Education Program, which is one of the important factors by which we evaluate the appropriateness of this new policy.

2. Service Learning in Taiwan

2.1 Definition of service learning

Service learning, also referred to as *service-learning*, is not new in the education field. In the United States, service learning began in the early 1970s (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010). Nevertheless, researchers have defined service learning differently in their studies for several decades. Service learning can be a teaching/learning method (Lake & Jones, 2008; Osman, 2011), a form of education (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010; Werder & Strand, 2011), or a pedagogy (Segrist, 2013). To date, there still isn't a commonly agreed definition of the term. Nonetheless, a review of recent studies shows there is growing consensus that service learning comprises two complex concepts: *service*, referring to community action, and *learning*, referring to efforts to learn from that action (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). The present study regard service learning as a pedagogy which integrates service activities into academic curricula so that students can learn through real-life experiences (Segrist, 2013).

Community service is a similar term that is often mixed up with service learning. While differentiating the two may be difficult, it is helpful to adopt the example composed by the National Youth Leadership Council to see their differences. (Clipolle, 2010, p.4).

- *Cleaning up a riverbank is (COMMUNITY) SERVICE.*
- *Sitting in a science classroom looking at water samples under a microscope is LEARNING.*
- *Science students taking samples from local water sources, then analyzing the samples, documenting the results and presenting the scientific information to a pollution control agency is SERVICE LEARNING.*

By the example we can comprehend that when students undertake a *community service* task, they do something for the good of the community. Whether they learn something from that service isn't the primary concern of that action. When they undertake *service learning* tasks, they are learning from their service action and what they learn may be closely related to one of their school curricula. The service and the learning are equally important in that action. To sum up, there are two dimensions in service learning: the service dimension and the learning dimension. In the brochure of Twelve-Year Basic Education Program published by Ministry of Education, there is no clear definition of the term *service learning*, but it states clearly 'that students during high school years can join school service, community service or performance and so on'. (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 30). From the statement we can infer that definition of service learning by Ministry of Education is nearly the same as community service.

2.2 Service Learning in Taiwan's education

Taiwan began to promote service learning in the early 1990s (Lin, Wu, Wu, Pan, & Liao, 2014). Today, every college in Taiwan has service learning opportunities which are either integrated into normal curriculum or provided by service-based clubs, which are outside normal curriculum and are usually more of community service than service learning. To provide sufficient information about service learning, many colleges set up special websites

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