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Empowering Indigenous Youth: Perspectives from a National Service Learning Program in Taiwan

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Abstract

Issues related to Indigenous higher education have received more attention in recent years. An important aspect has been the adjustment and development of more inclusive regulatory policies. This study explores the policy-enhancing role of non-profit organizations (NPOs) in empowering Indigenous college students through an analysis of a nationwide service learning program initiated by a NPO based in Taiwan. The findings revealed the important role of NPOs in enhancing government policies by leveraging their knowledge base and resource networking in order to develop a service learning program for Indigenous youth, which aimed to develop their self-confidence and strengthen their ethnic identity. The article identified four themes that are essential for non-profit organizations in designing and implementing empowerment-based programs for Indigenous participants: developing resource networking partnerships, emphasizing responsibility, building effective mutual trust, and sustaining endeavors.

Empowering Indigenous Youth: Perspectives from a National Service Learning Program in Taiwan

Indigenous people's social problems have gained broad attention with respect to issues like social justice, affirmative action, and multicultural education since the 1970s (Banks & Banks, 2001; Freire, 1970; Ogbu, 1978; Torres, 1998). In the area of education, the exploration of empowerment and equality for Indigenous students has become a critical issue (Cheng & Jacob, 2008; Giroux, 1988; Hooks, 1994; Sleeter, 1991). During the 1990s, the Taiwan government began to address the problem of equal access to education for ethnic minorities, passing the Education Act for Aboriginal Peoples (1998) and approving the Indigenous Peoples Basic Law (2005). Although this legislation guaranteed various basic rights, Indigenous students were still encountering many challenges within the school system. Through a case analysis of a nationwide service learning program designed and implemented by a non-profit organization, this article investigates how non-profit organizations can, by using a "service learning pedagogy" and resources-networking strategy, support Indigenous college students' efforts to address identity issues and reflect on ways to integrate identity awareness along with professional career development.

Historical Background of the Aborigines in Taiwan

Taiwan's population is about 23 million and consists of two distinct ethnic groups: the Han majority (97.8 percent), who settled on the island some 400 years ago, and the original Aborigine inhabitants (2.2 percent), who are currently classified into 14 tribes and have a total population of about 513,000 (Ministry of Interior, 2012). Recent research suggests that the first Aborigine ancestors may have occupied the island about 8,000 years before the Han majority arrived on the island (Blust, 1999).

The Spanish and the Dutch ruled over Taiwan for a short period during the 17th century; however, Taiwan was later colonized by Japan following the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. In 1948, Taiwan was taken over by the Republic of China, who, under the Kuomintang (KMT), declared martial law and became the governing polity in 1949 (Ito, 1996). During the various colonization periods, Aborigines were labeled with racist and discriminatory names like "wild aborigines," "civilized aborigines," or "mountain tribes." Successive governments employed political and military power to inhibit or suppress the culture and language of the Aborigines (Hsieh, 2006).

When the martial law was finally lifted in 1987, political democratization in Taiwan staged a new era for the Aborigines. Various rehabilitation movements were initiated, such as encouraging the emergence of new forms of appellations, awareness-raising, and cultural reconstruction (Xu, 1990). However, as early as December 1984, the Taiwan Aboriginal People's Movement (TAPM) was created under the Alliance of Taiwan Aborigines (ATA, or *yuan chuan hui*) (Hsieh, 2006; Stainton, 1999). The sending of an ATA representative to the 1988 United Nations Working Group on

Indigenous Populations staged a new era of pressuring government to revise policies to address the problems of the Aborigines (United Nations, 2008). In 1994, the Taiwanese government officially recognized the legal status of its Indigenous groups. The Aborigines were renamed as the "earliest inhabitants." The appellations *hsien chu min* ("First people") or *tsao chu min* ("Early People") were also accepted to evoke a sense of this group's historical immigration to Taiwan (Stainton, 1999). In 1996, the Council of Indigenous Peoples was established with the purpose of managing the affairs of the Indigenous people.

Aboriginal Education in Taiwan

In 1998, the Education Act for Aboriginal Peoples (1998) was enacted to endorse multicultural values and to promote Indigenous education; shortly thereafter, structural reforms in Aboriginal education ensued. Mother-tongue language learning, ethnic curricula, and pedagogies were emphasized to encourage cultural practices. Nevertheless, in rural areas where most of the Indigenous people live, the lack of qualified teachers and job opportunities made it difficult for Indigenous youth to remain in their rural communities. Hence, more and more Indigenous young people migrated into cities (Chou, 2005; Li & Ou, 1992) until approximately 47% of Indigenous population resided in urban areas (Ministry of Interior, 2012). The rural Indigenous communities suffered from manpower drain and were faced with serious problems of sustainability. The urbanization of Indigenous groups also created new challenges for the younger generation. Indigenous students in cities experienced cultural shock and marginalization at schools where they felt alien or even victimized (S. Chen, Hwang, & Chiu, 2003).

To ameliorate existing conditions, the government provided subsidies for tuition and living expenses for Aboriginal students enrolled in secondary or post-secondary education. The law also protected opportunities in higher education for Aboriginal people and mandated that Aboriginal students receive a mark up of 25 percent on original scores for college entrance exams.

The problem of underrepresentation of Aboriginal students in higher education gradually improved after the law was passed and recent statistics showed that the ratio of Aboriginal to total college students rose from 0.64% in 1998 to 1.64% in 2011 (Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2013). However, the current ratio of 1.64% is still significantly disproportionate, given the fact that the student ratio for the Aborigines in relation to the total student population in Taiwan at the high school level is above 2.5%. Moreover, at the post-secondary education level, Aboriginals have a much higher dropout rate (Council of Indigenous Peoples, 2013).

The present study aimed to address the concern of Indigenous youth empowerment. More specifically, we analyzed an empowerment-based service learning program for Aboriginal college students. Through a case analysis, we discussed the role of non-profit organizations in organizing a

nationwide service learning program that offers a unique opportunity for Indigenous youth to effectively assume their ethnic identity and to develop self-confidence and self-esteem.

Literature Review

Indigenous Education in Taiwan

Indigenous students were often left behind while studying together with non-Indigenous students. Factors associated with low academic performance of Indigenous students include low socio-economic status (J. Lin, 2000), problems of learning adjustment (Chiu, 2000; Fu, 2001; Y. Lin, 2001), ethnic stereotyping by teachers (P. Chen, 1998; Chou, 2005), and cultural differences in educational expectations (Lu, 1986; Tan, 2002; Tang, 2002). Research emphasizing the adoption of an Indigenous standpoint in order to develop a meaningful connection between Indigenous identity and issues of Indigenous education has ranged from a critique of the Chinese-centric curriculum (Jian, 1991; C. Lin, 1998; M. Lin, 1997), the promotion of mother-tongue instruction (M. Huang, 1998), to advocacy for multicultural education (Kao, 2000; Sun, 2000).

Indigenous education at the college level has received increased academic attention. Some research has explored the socio-psychological aspects of learning adjustment for Indigenous college students. The aspects include learning motivation (Liu et. al, 2000), successful learning styles (Liu, 2007), and a comparison of campus experiences and development for Aborigine and Chinese students. Factors like self-concept and esteem, adjustment strategies, academic engagement, faculty-student relationships, and peer relationships are most often mentioned (Liu & Huang, 2005).

Two studies have suggested that group identity and cultural recovery affect individuals' career achievement (I. Huang, 1999; Wu, 1999). I. Huang's (1999) research on career development of Indigenous college graduates found that the internalization of ethnic identity was the primary reason for the individuals' higher academic achievement. Wu (1999) showed that the success of Indigenous elites was positively associated with family support and developing awareness of ethnic identity and culture.

In short, most research on Indigenous education in Taiwan has focused on formal education and has taken a "medicalized" view to identify factors associated with learning problems of Indigenous students in coping with mainstream goals set up by the formal educational system (P. Chen, 2012). As Brickman et al. (1982) emphasized, the "medical" view implicitly accepts mainstream goals without raising the concern of what values and norms are needed to empower Indigenous youth to have the freedom to be whoever they want.

Aboriginal Identity, Self-Confidence, Self-Esteem

Aboriginal students' self-confidence and self-esteem are hindered by negative experiences at school, especially those associated with their Aboriginal identity (P. Chen, 1998; Chou, 2005; Liu & Huang, 2005; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Urban schools often suffered from colonial imperatives and ethnic prejudice that originated in the colonial past so that schools became hostile to Aboriginal identity development (Battiste, 2000; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Consequently, many Aboriginal students have experienced bullying by non-Aboriginal students and have had negative interactions with teachers (Richmond & Smith, 2012), which in turn have a long-term impact on Aboriginal students' self-esteem and self-confidence.

Phinney (1990) theorized that ethnic identity development is a process of identity construction that combines the experiences and knowledge of the individual with a sense of belongingness to an ethnic group. The process of identity construction, as suggested by Phinney (1990), includes three stages: unexamined identity, identity search, and identity achievement. At the stage of unexamined identity, the individual takes his or her ethnic identity for granted without personal examination. At the stage of identity search, the individual embarks on a questioning of ethnicity, often initiated by significant experiences such as humiliation or discrimination, which results in a heightened awareness of ethnicity. A confident and secure sense of self, as well as a good understanding of where one's in-group is located within the broader social context, characterizes the stage of identity achievement. The individual successfully overcomes the negative impact of earlier experiences of humiliation or discrimination. At the identity achievement stage, the ethnic identity has been internalized by the individual and become a source of career inspiration and meaning.

This study addressed the issue of Indigenous youth empowerment. Phinney's (1990) theory suggested that empowerment may occur if Aboriginal students can ultimately reach the achievement stage of ethnic identity development. In this sense, an empowerment-based service learning program should be designed so as to create opportunities for participants to reflect, discuss, and share experiences with Aboriginal identity, as well as to facilitate the effective internalization of Aboriginal identity in order to develop self-confidence and self-esteem.

Service Learning, a Basis for Empowerment

Most Indigenous students have encountered negative identity-related experiences at schools and they need to reflect on those experiences and redirect their energy to obtain self-confidence and connect ethnic identity with career development in a constructive way. In this respect, service learning has proved to be an effective pedagogy. In a broad sense, service learning is the integration of academic study with volunteer service, requiring that students participate in organized services for identified community needs and reflect on the service experiences to enhance academic learning and civic responsibility (Jacoby, 1996; Steinberg, Bringle & Williams, 2010). Service learning programs

encourage student-teacher interaction, teamwork, and active learning (Jacoby, 1996). Most research confirms that service learning enhances student learning overall (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Specifically, "engaged learning practices" is one of the most important practices to achieve the goals of critical thinking and transformative learning (Hart Research Associates, 2009).

P. Chen (2004) pointed out the importance of consciousness-raising in empowering marginalized groups. Sleeter (1991) emphasized the point that minority students have to develop a keen awareness of power relations and must learn to employ critical thinking so that they can empower themselves to cope with frustrating situations. While formal education tends to emphasize professional training without the questioning of underlying mainstream values, non-formal education often aims to raise students' awareness of social injustice and the value of commitment in social change. Hence, service learning, which lies between formal and non-formal education, can be understood as both conformative and transformative with respect to empowerment. The conformative view suggests that students develop professional skills and career motivation through service to communities. The educational goal is oriented toward personal self-efficacy and career development in a highly competitive world. In contrast, the transformative view highlights the critical thinking aspect of service learning: The goal is to empower students to develop an awareness of ethnic identity and to become agents of change in an unjust society.

Methodology

A nationwide government-sponsored service learning program (SLP) called "Return to Village to Serve" (RVS) program was chosen as the primary data collection source for the study. From 2000 to 2010, the Formosa Corps (a non-profit organization in Taiwan that has been serving tribal people for more than forty years) operated the RVS program to empower Indigenous college students in Taiwan. Given the achievement of the RVS program in Taiwan, this program was chosen for case analysis.

Background of the "Return to Village to Serve" (RVS) Program

The RVS program originated from disaster relief and recovery efforts in Taiwan after a massive earthquake on September 21, 1999. Many villages where Indigenous people lived were devastated. Because the Formosa Corps (hereafter, the Corps) had served Indigenous villages since the 1960s, the Council of Aboriginal Affairs sponsored the Corps to initiate a new program to encourage Indigenous college students to serve in Indigenous villages destroyed by the earthquake. The Corps developed the RVS program with two main goals: (a) to empower Indigenous youth, especially those in colleges; and (b) to improve the quality of life in tribal communities. Initially, the RVS program targeted seven villages damaged by the earthquake; however, after 2001 the program extended its services to other tribal villages. The RVS program recruited 100 Indigenous college students per year. Participants were required to attend a one-week training program to acquire the

knowledge and skills of teamwork, community service-related subjects, and tribal context. During the summer break, participants were sent to villages in groups to serve for three weeks.

The Corps carefully organized the personnel of the RVS program. Participants were grouped into 12 service groups, one for each of 12 selected villages. Each group had a facilitator, selected from the program alumni pool. Participants were paid a small stipend for their services, an important incentive because Indigenous college students usually need to take summer jobs to earn their tuition. A program manager was hired to facilitate program activities and to handle bookkeeping and government reporting. Drawing from the group facilitators of previous years, the Corps recruited four persons to form a leading team (LT) responsible for program implementation. LT members had at least two years of prior experience with the program and were therefore very familiar with the operation and main characteristics of the program.

The RVS program inherited a spirit of caring and commitment from the Corps. The Corps was the first private non-profit organization in Taiwan to address the needs of the Aborigines on the island. Each summer, the Corps recruits Chinese college students to travel to remote areas of the mountainside to establish contact with Aborigine families. With an attitude of earnest respect and willingness to learn, students develop a relationship based on mutual understanding with the Aborigines and practice caring and respect for others.

The Corps' caring and long-term commitment to the Aborigines is crucial for fostering trust and cooperation between Indigenous and Chinese youth. Not only has the Corps implemented summer service learning programs in selected Aboriginal communities for years, but also it has encouraged young leaders to initiate new programs of their own. Several key Chinese members from the Corps who have a special compassion for Aborigines initiated the RVS program. The RVS program equipped Aboriginal participants with effective leadership skills. Its success was demonstrated by the fact that, after three years of operation, the leadership role in the RVS program was exclusively fulfilled by Indigenous youth.

The Corps is committed to providing quality training for participants and delivering quality services to the tribal communities. To ensure that RVS services would adequately address villages' needs, the LT would carefully choose 20 villages and first conduct an on-site needs assessment during April and May. Based on the needs assessment, the LT then selected 12 villages with clearly identified, feasible goals for the service program. Feasibility is emphasized so that goals beyond their reach would not frustrate participants. The needs for daycare for the elderly, summer teaching programs for pupils, life education programs, and information literacy programs are common to many villages.

The RVS training program was designed according to the varying objectives and action plans for services every year to ensure that all the participants acquired adequate skills to deliver quality services. The training program entailed two parts: general training and special training. The general

training covered subjects such as interpersonal skills, group dynamics, teaching activity design, interviewing skills, and orientation on Indigenous history and current status, and governmental welfare programs for the Aborigines. The special training addressed the special service needs of that particular year. Typically, special training would include library usage, media for teaching, documentary production, field research methods, ecology, and community development skills.

Data Collection

This study aimed to explore the role of the Corps in designing and implementing the nationwide service learning program for Aboriginal college students and used open-ended interviewing as the primary qualitative research device (Seidman, 1998). The researchers interviewed the executive director, program manager, and a board member of the Corps to learn about the background, purposes, and processes that the program entailed, as well as the mission, background history, and operations of the Corps with regard to the concept of empowerment of Aboriginal youth. To explore whether the program had achieved its empowerment goal, the researchers interviewed 13 Indigenous college students who had participated in the RVS program. The program manager helped to invite five team leaders for interviews and through them the researchers were able to reach five group facilitators and three first-time participants. The interview schedule covered the following topics: (a) educational experiences prior to college, (b) college learning experiences, (c) motives for participating in the program, and (d) RVS service learning experiences and impact. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition to the interviews, documents such as program proposals, contracts, meeting minutes, and the evaluation reports were collected from the Corps and examined.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the study was to understand the role of the Corps in designing the nationwide service learning program for Aboriginal college students and to identity significant themes underlying the empowerment of Aboriginal youth. The study used a general inductive approach (Silverman, 2000). In this approach, researchers begin with extensive readings of the interview transcripts. In the second step, each researcher identifies main categories or themes and through discussions and re-examination of the transcripts, researchers reach consensus about the main themes. A next step is the coding the data and grouping concepts and text sections according to the main categories. This inductive process gradually produces the basis of the main thematic findings.

The main categories and associated concepts found by the study include:

1. Platform for resource networking (i.e., role of the Corps as non-profit organization): partnership (with government agencies, universities, and local communities); resource networking abilities; designing training programs; self-organization and

self-management principles; program sustainability; care for Aboriginal students and communities; and organizational mission and commitment.

2. Empowerment: developing a sense of duty (responsibility); facing frustrating school experiences; developing leadership; learning about own culture and mother tongue language; experiencing community, team, sharing, self-confidence and self-esteem.

3. Mutual trust: building mutual trust and collaboration (between Han and Aboriginals).

4. Sustained endeavors: networking; engaging in Indigenous affairs; volunteering; participating in follow-up learning opportunities; developing career aspirations and appreciation for the Corps.

Findings

The RVS program was designed to empower Aboriginal youth. The program provided Indigenous youth with opportunities to reconnect with their villages. Most of the youth lived in cities and many of them were no longer able to speak their traditional languages. Based on data collected from interviews, four themes stand out strongly and are considered to be essential for Indigenous youth empowerment: the development of a platform for resource networking, the design of a program based on empowerment and responsibility, the building of effective mutual trust, and the opportunity for sustained endeavors.

Platform for Resource Networking and Empowerment

The executive director emphasized that the Corps played an important role in creating a partnership platform with universities, communities, and governmental agencies. While many universities offer service learning programs of various types, they mainly focus on their own students. In contrast, the RVS was designed to attract Aboriginal college students from all universities. The Corps allied with universities and local communities to develop the service learning program. The government has the resources, but it lacks the ability to design and implement an effective service learning program. The Corps was effective serving as an organizer that made best use of the government funding to design and implement a nationwide service learning program that links Indigenous students with rural Indigenous communities. One interviewee commented on the program:

> This is an important platform through which young Indigenous college students began to know their tribal cultures, to be close to their origins. . . . Also through this platform, we learned to care and show concern about Indigenous issues and affairs. . . . We got the chance to learn what could not be attained at college classrooms. . . . The experiences in the community will touch you, and those who were touched will then embrace the mission of the revival of Indigenous communities and engage in.

Emphasis of Responsibility

The Corps structured the RVS program on the basis of a self-management principle to encourage participants to manage themselves and to cultivate their problem-solving abilities and sense of responsibility. The Corps' role was mainly facilitative in developing service learning, giving participants sufficient opportunities to learn from their firsthand experiences and to practice leadership skills. The executive director delegated the responsibility to the LT to make all decisions and take full responsibility, except in the case of life-threatening decisions such as those involving typhoon warnings. Participants greatly appreciated the fact that the RVS program empowered them to value their own language and culture and respect their people. Youth are empowered when children in the villages see them as role models or when the elderly see them as hope for the future. In addition, youths empower one another as they are achieving the goals and dealing successfully with challenges. A student group in the village met a senior woman, who was almost one hundred years old:

> The grandmother could not speak Chinese. Only ancient Atayal! I kept trying to talk to her. She told us that she was abandoned by her children. They've never taken care of her. . . . Even so, she had to raise one grand-grandson. . . . Although my group members couldn't understand even a single sound, we were so touched by her story that we wept.

The leadership role designed for team leaders and group facilitators gave Indigenous students not only the opportunity to learn leadership skills but also a space within which they could internalize their collective identity by leading and serving new participants. For example, one participant was recruited into the leadership team after two consecutive years of participation. He greatly appreciated the leadership training that he had received and which made him capable of leading the RVS program. He described his experiences of empowerment:

> My first experience was chaotic. I didn't know how to work with my group. . . . My facilitator was dissatisfied with my sloppiness. . . . Then I became the facilitator [the next year]. I learned to be responsible for my group's performance. . . . Then I joined the lead team to learn how to plan and make things work. . . . We kept asking questions, searching for better ways to solve problems, and evaluating what we had done. . . . I couldn't believe I turned out to be a demanding supervisor, setting high standards for my team to achieve the mission of the program.

Building Effective Mutual Trust

Identity conflict is a main factor that hinders the development of trust (P. Chen, 2012). Many Indigenous college students attended high school in cities and almost all of them had negative identity-related experiences with their Chinese classmates. This expereince made Indigenous youth

hesitant to develop mutual trust with their Chinese counterparts. They preferred to join Indigenous student clubs. The Corps' executive director shared his insights:

> Indigenous youth tend to live in closed circles or groups. Generally speaking, this is good for them. But the close-knit mentality also became a great limit to their development. The world is moving toward integration, inter-disciplinarity, and inter-culture. Therefore the Indigenous youth might needs to be more open-minded, cooperative, and innovative.

The program manager, whose ethnic identity is Chinese, emphasized the challenges in nurturing trust and collaboration between Chinese and Indigenous youth. A team leader shared a confrontational experience:

> During the intensive training camp, a participant left the training site after dinner for a couple of hours to meet his friend without informing us. By the rules he should be disqualified from the service learning program, for the rules said that participants shall not leave the camp site except for important reasons, with permission. But we thought he might deserve a second chance. But the program manager was firm that the rules should be followed. She told us that trust is about responsibility and the participants need to be responsible for their behavior.

The Chinese youth in the Corps made substantial contributions to the initiation of the program. The leading team was initially filled with both Chinese and Indigenous youth. The Corps continued to work closely with the LT and the Indigenous RVS participants throughout the year-long cycle of the program. All these efforts have contributed to building mutual trust.

Sustained Endeavors

The Corps played a pivotal role in resource networking, which impacted both the participants and the Indigenous communities. Active RVS participants found various opportunities to network with the community and to benefit from the experience. For example, nine interviewees were engaged in Indigenous cultural forums. Through active engagement in dialogue on Indigenous affairs, they developed networks with other Indigenous young leaders and gradually familiarized themselves with cultural and political issues, thus unveiling opportunities for action.

The Corps actively sought follow-up learning opportunities for RVS participants. The RVS participants are invited to various programs in volunteering, cultural exposure, or career development. The Corps also devotedly facilitated cross-sectoral collaboration, bridging tribal communities with non-tribal and developing various projects to engage businesses and other non-profit organizations in expanding community development for the Aborigines. The program manager mentioned that some RVS participants wanted to help Indigenous elementary school students in Taipei and the Corps deployed its network to get support from the government and

Chinese youth to initiate an after-school program for an elementary school where many Indigenous kids are in crucial need of after-school tutoring. Another telling example is that two RVS participants became key coordinators for disaster relief in their home villages after Typhoon Morakot created catastrophic damage in Taiwan on August 8, 2009. The executive director also pointed out that a few RVS participants even returned to their villages to become village leaders, bringing new hope and talent to the Indigenous communities.

Most interviewees highly appreciated what they gained from the program: the opportunity to create and implement the service learning program, the development of new friendships, the exhilaration of enhanced self-efficacy and pride, and the accomplishments they had collectively reached. Many felt a sense of solidarity—"We become one!"

The RVS program had a strong impact on career aspirations. Two participants responded that they purposefully took ethnography and sociology classes because those courses are most relevant to Indigenous issues. Two others decided to pursue graduate education in ethnic studies. One interviewee mentioned that she became so clear about the purpose of her undergraduate learning that she switched her major to education. She is genuinely passionate about education and her career goal is to nurture leaders in the rebuilding of Indigenous communities. She said:

> From the Indigenous standpoint, it is important to foster diverse professional talents and capabilities among the Indigenous people so that we can sustain and enrich our developmental spaces. . . . I'm convinced that my vocation is in education. . . . I can fulfill an empowering pedagogy, using Indigenous perspective to develop a curriculum and teaching methods for our people.

There are several parallels between our own findings and the results of a study conducted by Hall, Rata, and Adds (2013) with Māori students in New Zealand. Hall et al. (2013) found that aspirations, learning opportunities, engagement, and support were the most important thematic factors that contributed positively to Māori students' engagement with Māori studies. Interestingly, the four themes put forward by our study in capturing the uniqueness of the RVS program include: networking for cross-sectoral partnerships, fostering a sense of responsibility, nurturing mutual trust, and sustaining participants' career inspirations. Hall et al. (2013) discovered the importance of aspirations for Māori student engagement with studies; the current study emphasized how the RVS program actively sought ways to sustain students' career aspirations. They suggested that surrounding people influence student engagement with Māori studies. Along the same vein, the present study indicated that the Corps fostered mutual trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and that such trust is critical for student engagement in the RVS program. In addition, Hall et al. (2013) reported that Māori studies served as a learning opportunity for Māori students to acquire Māori knowledge. The current study reached a similar conclusion: The RVS program was designed to offer Indigenous students empowerment-based learning

opportunities to gain first-hand experiences and knowledge about their own cultures. Specifically, the RVS program adopted the self-management principle so that students would have better opportunities to become active and responsible participants. Hall et al. (2013) also emphasized that Māori students faced many challenges and needed support to overcome the challenges. The current study found that the Corps actively developed resource networks and partnerships to deepen support for the students.

Conclusions

This research analyzed the RVS program from the perspective of empowerment. The findings supported the fact that participants' mindsets (i.e., how they perceive themselves) are crucial in envisioning their future career paths. The RVS program invited Indigenous college students to serve in Indigenous villages. Although the mindset of most Indigenous students had been adversely impacted by negative experiences at city schools, the RVS program effectively offered an experiential educational opportunity for participants to develop self-confidence and a better grasp of their ethnic identity.

Contrasting with discipline-oriented, formal education, the RVS program was designed to be action-oriented and to facilitate an empowering learning process. Indigenous students not only interacted among themselves but also with village people and Chinese youth. They critically reflected on identity issues and developed more meaningful and stronger connections between their college education, career goals, and the collective future of Indigenous peoples. The RVS program showed that non-profit organizations and formal educational institutions are to some extent complementary, but also interdependent in offering holistic education for minority students. More interestingly, the RVS program highlighted the important role of non-profit organizations (NPO) in enhancing the quality of government policies. NPOs can play the role of a cross-sectoral partnership catalyst for the design and implementation of nationwide programs to empower Indigenous youth.

While it is common to see Indigenous organizations dealing with Indigenous issues and mobilizing for collective action, this study suggested that the cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students helps youth move beyond negative stereotyping in order to build trust through empowering synergy. The RVS program vividly demonstrated the role that an NPO may play in fostering collaboration between the Aboriginal and Chinese youth.

The success of the RVS program depended on the development of trust among various stakeholders. The Corps is committed to the Aborigines' betterment and has a long history in serving the Aborigines. It takes time to develop trust, accumulate tacit knowledge and cultivate people's attitudes. The RVS program bloomed in the soil of the caring spirit and sustained commitment of the NPO to Indigenous peoples and their cultures. This finding echoed and extended the knowledge

that trust is the most essential factor in developing cooperation among non-profit organizations (Yankey, Willen, McClellan, & Jacobus, 2005).

The self-management principle was embedded in the structure of the RVS program, giving participants more opportunities to develop a sense of responsibility and to practice leadership skills. Participants could deal with conflict, which become a source for empowerment.

The endeavors do not end as participants complete their services in the summer because the Corps continues to encourage them to engage in other experiences that will sustain learning and career development. Some RVS alumni even return villages to become leaders and managers of local organizations. Hence, the RVS program achieved its long-term goal in nurturing leaders for Aboriginal communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, a few recommendations for non-profit practitioners in designing programs to empower Indigenous youth are proposed:

- Apply self-management principles to enhance students' active participation and sense of responsibility.

- Actively seek out and establish partnerships with government agencies, universities, and Indigenous communities.

- Design programs that are experience-based (such as service learning programs).

- Expose students to Indigenous cultures for ethnic identity awareness, and invite students to reflect on their professional education and career development.

- Design programs that facilitate cooperation between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous counterparts. This mixture may enhance mutual trust and benefit both groups.

Study Limitations

There are several noteworthy limitations of this study. First, the study is based mainly on interviews with the managers and participants of the Corps and thus may not represent the full spectrum of views. Given the interviewees' strong affective and working ties with the Corps, the findings may be biased toward the positive side of the program. Second, the participants interviewed were mainly referred by team leaders, rather than a random sampling of all participants. This may have created a bias toward positive responses as well. Third, the study did not interview influential actors in local communities or from government agencies. Interviews with those people would significantly

improve the quality of the study and enable a better understanding of the role of the Corps in operating the program. Fourth, the findings of the study are limited to the context of the specific organization and program; therefore generalization of results should be done with caution.

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