

# Youth-Led Initiative in Community Service-Learning Projects and Their Learning Experience

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This paper presents a study of 428 youths who participated in service-learning projects in developing countries in South-East Asia, China and India. Using mixed-method approach, this study examined the reasons for their participation in the YEP (youth expedition projects) and the impact of their service-learning experiences on their civic attitudes and competence skills. Positive outcomes in civic engagement, competence skills and development of sense of self for participants as a whole and in terms of age group are discussed. The author concludes that it is important to make service-learning an explicit training and educational goal in order for educators to facilitate the building of capacities in youths, so that they can appreciate the value that service-learning can bring in character development and shape early commitment to civic involvement.

*Keywords:* volunteer programmes, service-learning, civic attitudes, competence skills

## Introduction

The Singapore International Foundation organizes overseas volunteer programmes through launching and implementing the national youth expedition projects as a learning programme since February 2000. It encourages participants between the age of 17-25 years old to join the YEP (youth expedition projects), although the younger and the older age group may volunteer in the expedition. Through participation in the YEP, it aims to inspire youth through meaningful participation in service-learning to make a difference to the lives of others. It is hoped that through the YEP, opportunities will be given to youths to help them develop civic attitudes and competence skills, as a result of the service-learning experience (Singapore International Foundation, 2002).

Training programmes and courses were provided for the participants prior to their overseas service-learning expedition. The leaders and facilitators had undergone both internal and external training programmes to be well equipped with the skills and knowledge before they led the YEP expeditions. Leaders and facilitators were given the expeditionary service-learning leadership course (40 hours) to enable them to manage the team and to facilitate guided reflection in the expedition. Along with the facilitation aspects, team leaders and facilitators were also taught to apply risk assessment and emergency management in case of emergencies during the expedition. In other words, youth manage the entire project from conception till the execution.

According to Larson (2000), youth activities are a context for the development of qualities, skills and

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attitudes. Thus, the overseas community service-learning experience may be an avenue to develop positive developmental outcomes, such as tenacity, problem-solving skills, interpersonal relationships and civic attitudes. Participation in these activities would be self-determined, but supported and guided according to age, personal attribute and ability, so that youths are stretched to their potential.

This study sought to explore the different reasons that participants were contemplating about before going on the overseas community service-learning expedition. It also sought to examine the impact of meaningful participation of youths through the overseas community service-learning expedition. The study examined the personal factors and processes that might lead to positive outcomes of youths who were engaged in the overseas community service-learning expedition, namely, the YEP in Singapore. Positive outcomes in terms of civic engagement and competence skills were also discussed.

This study may add significance to the importance of overseas community service-learning experience in positive development in youth. The results of this study may help organization, specifically the Singapore International Foundation that sponsored the YEP, to ascertain whether service-learning is an explicit training in building youth capacities and their character development.

### **Community Service-Learning Outcomes**

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of community service-learning outcomes. Understanding the potential learning and development outcomes of community service-learning enabled educators to shape desired outcomes and design service and reflection experiences to achieve them (McEwen, 1996). Some of the positive outcomes that have been linked to students' participation included personal (Giles & Eyler, 1994), attitudinal (Ikeda, 1999), moral (Weglarz, 2000), social (Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002; Mullins, 2003) and cognitive outcomes (Eyler, Root, & Giles, 1998; Lund, 1998).

Gallini and Moely (2003) reported that service-learning created opportunities for youths to interact with their peers and develop friendships as well as increased their ability to interact with others in a positive way. Gallini and Moely (2003) conducted a study on 142 students who participated in service-learning and 171 who did not ( $N = 313$ ). Interpersonal relationships accounted for 7% of the variance in scores. Respondents evaluated the course's influence on their ability to work with others effectively, communicate with other students and make friends. Service-learners cited that reflections sessions, participation in orientations and training, and travel together to service sites all provided opportunities for peer interaction. In short, findings suggest that building upon people's strengths in their community can promote feelings of efficaciousness and competence.

Studies have found that community service-learning may impact civic attitudes in youth. Astin and Sax (1998) and Weglarz (2000) found that participants reported greater awareness of community needs, appreciation of cultural diversity, awareness of socio-cultural problems and empathy or sensitivity for others. There was an increase in commitment to help others and studies found that females were more likely than males to serve in community service. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that students showed an increased level of tolerance and ability to work with others across difference after participating in a service-learning course. Bartel, Saavedra, and Dyne (2001) found that age and gender were not key predictors of civic or personal learning. Moely et al. (2002) found that there were significant changes in social justice attitudes, civic action, interpersonal and problem-solving skills and leadership skills for those service-learning students in all the post-tests. In short, studies have found that community service-learning may impact civic attitudes on youth

and there may or may not be differences in civic attitude outcomes by demographic characteristics.

### **A Study of the YEP on Civic Attitudes and Competence Skills**

Two questions were used to guide this study. Firstly, prior to the expedition, what were the reasons for participating in the YEP? Secondly, after the expedition, what was the impact of the YEP experience on civic attitudes and competence skills of the participants, as a whole and in terms of age group?

This study employed a mixed-method approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The participants selected comprised youths ( $N = 428$ ), aged 16-25 years, were part of the 3,979 participants of the YEP that were sent out in cohorts by the Singapore International Foundation in 2004 to the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asia Nations), China and India.

The CASQ (civic attitudes and skills questionnaire) was used to measure the impact of the YEP on the participants. The CASQ yields scores in six scales developed through factor analysis (Moely et al., 2002). The subscales measure civic action, political awareness, social justice attitudes and diversity attitudes. These subscales make up the civic attitudes scale. Interpersonal and problem-solving skills, leadership skills and sensitivity constitute the personal competence skills. Items are scored in a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “Strongly disagree, 1” to “Strongly agree, 5”. Coefficient alpha reliability for the full measure was 0.87.

The structured interview schedules for the participants consisted of seven main open-ended questions that elicited their reflections and evaluations on the following: their expedition activities, their contributions to service learning, the achievement of their objectives and their personal growth and insights in service-learning. The questions also asked about their critical evaluations of the extent to which the expedition made a difference in their lives, in the lives of the community that they served, and in their relationships with friends, families and program leaders, as well as their plans for future community volunteerism. All interviews were guided by structured interviews, tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

### **Results**

Table 1 shows the reasons of youth participation in the overseas community service-learning expeditions. Participants' responses are tabulated, according to the order of frequency of responses of the three categories. Table 1 shows that although slightly more than half of the participants ( $N = 247$  or 57.7%) knew that they were there to serve the community before they embarked on the trip, only about three out of every ten participants ( $N = 117$  or 27.3%) indicated that they wanted to make a difference in people's lives in the community and to contribute to society. In other words, civic action, that is, the altruistic involvement in community service among the participants was not so distinct before the service-learning expedition.

Before the overseas community service-learning expedition, only about two out of every ten participants ( $N = 81$  or 18.9%) indicated their interest in understanding the socio-cultural issues of other countries, which were different from Singapore. Thus, before embarking on the overseas community service-learning expedition, the level of civic engagement, such as making a difference and contributing to community, was not so developed in the majority of the participants.

As the YEP was a “first time” experience to the majority of the participants, “to learn” (ID 185 & ID 315) appeared to be a personal highlight to the reason given. Thus, the findings appear to partially correspond with the very essence of service-learning, that is, “learn to serve and serve to learn” (Eyler & Giles, 1999). It appears that at least eight out of every ten participants were indeed “learning to serve” in their first YEP. The Singapore

International Foundation only sponsored participants who went for the expeditions for the first time. Being first-timers, this may account for their priority in fostering personal development rather than in serving the community. Nevertheless, this finding was in line with the intention of the Singapore International Foundation, that is, to place an equal emphasis on service and learning, and to ensure that there are both service and learning goals on the project. Therefore, it was not surprising that participants expected to learn more than serve before embarking on their trip.

Table 1

*List of Youths' Reasons for Participating in the Overseas Community Service-Learning Expeditions (N = 428)*

Category N (percentage, %)	Reasons	N (percentage, %)	Samples of verbatim responses
Shaping civic attitude 328 (76.6)	Serving the community	130 (30.4)	(We want) to build a kindergarten for the kids over there. (ID 19)
		66 (15.4) 51 (11.9)	(I want) to help the less fortunate and make at least a difference in their lives. (ID 8) I would like to contribute what I can to the society and help the people in need. (ID 253)
	Understanding socio-cultural issues	81 (18.9)	(I want) to experience other culture and to understand the country better. (ID 38) I want to understand issues street kids are facing in India. (ID 205)
Developing competence skills 56 (13)	Developing interpersonal skill	40 (9.3)	I want to make new friends and interact... (ID 264) (I want) to get the feel of team spirit. (ID 321)
	Developing leadership skill	16 (3.7)	I want to learn to lead a team and develop people management skills. (ID 152) (I would like) to expand my capacity as a leader. (ID 224)
Building self-capacity 107 (25)	Strengthening self	92 (21.5)	It will also toughen/strengthen me... (ID 35) (It is) to... develop personal character... being humble... (ID 178)
	Pursuing academic goal	15 (3.5)	(I need)... to complete my compulsory community service hours. (ID 146) (I want) to gain wider knowledge on society through humanitarian and to be able to apply in my research later. (ID 320)

Table 2

*Score Ranges, Mean (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Civic Attitudes and Competence Skills Measure of Participants (N = 347)*

Variable	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Scale/Subscale				
Civic attitudes <sup>a</sup>	2.78	5.00	3.68	0.34
Civic action	2.63	5.00	3.95	0.51
Political awareness	1.67	5.00	3.35	0.58
Social justice	2.38	5.00	3.63	0.44
Diversity attitude	2.60	5.00	3.70	0.53
Competence skills <sup>b</sup>	2.62	4.55	3.63	0.32
Interpersonal and problem-solving skills	2.92	5.00	4.01	0.41
Leadership skills	1.80	4.80	3.36	0.56
Sensitivity	1.83	4.58	3.37	0.37
CASQ (civic attitudes and skills questionnaire) <sup>c</sup>	2.89	4.55	3.66	0.29

Notes. <sup>a</sup> Civic attitudes total mean score consists of civic action, political awareness, social justice and diversity attitude subscales;

<sup>b</sup> Competence skills total mean score consists of interpersonal and problem-solving, leadership skills and sensitivity subscales;

<sup>c</sup> Civic attitudes and skills questionnaire consists of subscale civic attitudes and subscale competence skills.

Table 2 shows the mean scores of civic attitudes and competence skills measure of the participants ( $N = 347$ ) after the expedition. Quantitative analyses indicated moderately high overall mean scores for civic attitudes and competence skills as a whole ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ). In other words, the findings show that the YEP participants seem to show a moderately high level of development of civic attitudes and competence skills. Participants seem to reflect some changes in attitudes towards diversity, political and social issues, and even had plans for future civic action. Larson (2000) described it as youths' development of initiative, which is closely related to capacity for agency or for autonomous action. Through the overseas community service-learning experience, youths seem quite motivated from within to direct attention and effort towards personal competencies, and at the same time, may likely to engage in some forms of civic responsibilities. While some participants seem to achieve more personal benefits, other participants seem to gain an understanding far more than just, that is, to help others.

### Comparison of Civic Attitudes and Competence Skills by Age Group

The ANOVA (analysis of variance) was used to compare the means for the civic attitudes and competence skills measures among the participants of different ages. The result revealed that there were significant differences in the overall mean scores of civic attitudes and competence skills measure by age group where  $F_{(2,344)} = 3.34$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). For civic attitudes, there were no significant age differences in the mean scores of the subscales, except for diversity attitude subscale, where  $F_{(2, 344)} = 3.28$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 3).

Table 3

*ANOVA Results for Civic Attitudes and Competence Skills of the Participants by Age Group (N = 347)*

Measures	Age group						df (degree of freedom)	Mean square	F (F-ratio)
	≤ 19 (N = 118)		20-23 (N = 173)		≥ 24 (N = 56)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Civic attitudes <sup>a</sup>	3.70	0.34	3.66	0.34	3.68	0.35	2	0.06	0.55
Civic action	4.00	0.48	3.91	0.53	3.97	0.47	2	0.28	1.09
Political awareness	3.38	0.55	3.30	0.59	3.42	0.57	2	0.41	1.23
Social justice	3.59	0.44	3.69	0.43	3.59	0.46	2	0.43	2.25
Diversity attitude	3.80	0.53	3.65	0.51	3.67	0.55	2	0.90	3.28*
Competence skills <sup>b</sup>	3.67	0.31	3.57	0.33	3.73	0.31	2	0.66	6.51**
Interpersonal and problem-solving skills	4.07	0.38	3.94	0.41	4.11	0.43	2	1.01	6.17**
Leadership skills	3.37	0.57	3.31	0.54	3.50	0.57	2	0.80	2.61
Sensitivity	3.41	0.38	3.32	0.37	3.43	0.33	2	0.40	3.00*
CASQ <sup>c</sup>	3.69	0.28	3.62	0.28	3.70	0.29	2	0.27	3.34*

*Notes.* Scales are bold-faced; <sup>a</sup>Subscale civic attitudes consists of civic action, political awareness, social justice and diversity attitude; <sup>b</sup>Subscale competence skills consist of interpersonal and problem-solving skills, leadership skills and sensitivity; <sup>c</sup>Civic attitudes and skills measure consist of civic attitudes subscale and competence skills subscale; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Post-hoc analysis using the Tukey's HSD (honestly significant difference) test in Table 4 revealed a significant differences in diversity attitude subscale for those of age 19 ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) and below against those in the age group 20-23 ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ) ( $p = 0.03$ ). Although the difference was slight, the results seem to suggest that more younger participants were interested in diversity issues than the older. Younger participants seem to slightly enjoy meeting people from diverse backgrounds in the overseas

community service-learning experience. They seem to find it slightly easier to relate to people from different races or cultures than their seniors.

Table 4

*The Tukey's HSD Post Hoc Test Results for Diversity Attitude Subscale of Participants by Age Group (N = 347)*

(I) Age group	(J) Age group	Mean difference (I-J)	<i>p</i>
19 & below	20-23	0.15*	0.03
	24 & above	0.14	0.24
20-23	19 & below	-0.15*	0.03
	24 & above	-0.02	0.97
24 & above	19 & below	-0.14	0.24
	20-23	0.02	0.97

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ .

By examining competence skills subscale, the result revealed that there were significant differences in the mean scores, where  $F_{(2, 344)} = 6.51$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Table 5, post-hoc analysis using the Tukey's HSD test showed statistically significant differences in competence skills for those in the age group 20-23 against those in the age groups 19 and below, as well as 24 and above at  $p < 0.02$  and  $p < 0.01$  respectively. In other words, the participants from the age 20-23 group seem to have slightly lower level of competence skills as compared to those participants from the 24 and above, as well as 19 and below age groups.

Table 5

*The Tukey's HSD Post Hoc Test Results for Competence Skills Subscale of Participants by Age Group*

Scale/Subscale	(I) Age group	(J) Age group	Mean difference (I-J)	<i>p</i>
Competence skills	19 & below	20-23	0.10	0.02*
		24 & above	-0.05	0.61
	20-23	19 & below	-0.10	0.02*
		24 & above	-0.15	0.01**
	24 & above	19 & below	0.05	0.61
		20-23	0.15	0.01**
Interpersonal and problem-solving skills	19 & below	20-23	0.14	0.01**
		24 & above	-0.04	0.82
	20-23	19 & below	-0.14	0.01**
		24 & above	-0.18	0.01**
	24 & above	19 & below	0.04	0.82
		20-23	0.18	0.01**
Sensitivity	19 & below	20-23	0.09	0.11
		24 & above	-0.02	0.93
	20-23	19 & below	-0.09	0.11
		24 & above	-0.11	0.13
	24 & above	19 & below	0.02	0.93
		20-23	0.11	0.13

Notes. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

There was statistically significant difference in the mean scores of interpersonal and problem-solving skills scale where  $F_{(2, 344)} = 6.17$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), but there was a marginal statistical significant differences in the mean scores of sensitivity subscale ( $p = 0.05$ ). While post-hoc analysis using the Tukey's HSD test did not show statistical significant mean differences in sensitivity, there was statistically significant mean differences in interpersonal and problem-solving skills subscale for those in the age group 20-23 against those in the age 19 and below, as well as 24 and above ( $p < 0.01$ ). The mean scores of interpersonal and problem-solving skills for those in the age 24 and above ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ) appeared to be slightly higher than the rest of the age groups. The result seems to

suggest that participants in the age group 24 and above had slightly higher level of interpersonal and problem-solving skills than the rest of the participants. In short, older participants seem to appear to be slightly more competent in interpersonal relationship and were slightly better problem-solvers. Older participants may likely to be very slightly more concerned with issues of sensitivity than younger participants.

In the qualitative analysis, participants showed better understanding of socio-cultural issues, social justice (poverty) awareness, and understanding strength in character of the community people. Findings show that there was an increase of 7.7% of participants who responded that their relationships were positive and very positive with their team leaders and an increase of 16.8% of participants who responded that their relationship was positive or very positive with their team members after the expedition. Participants had learnt to work with others, developed interpersonal skills and enhanced social competencies. In terms of positive sense of self, the findings revealed that the overseas community service-learning positively impacted their confidence (66%), sensitivity to others (56.5%), appreciation (30%), resiliency (25.9%) and maturity (12.1%). The results also suggest that there seemed to be a change in the participants' perspective towards life. The results suggest that the participants not only wanted to accomplish something meaningful for themselves, but also wished to help others ( $N = 105$  or 30.3%). In sum, the participants' belief in future appeared to have extended from personal to matters larger than the self, that is, the desire to contribute to the community after the service-learning experience.

### Conclusions

Overall, the findings seem to suggest that youths need opportunities, such as the YEP, for their development of civic attitudes and competence skills. It is worth noting that results from the study suggest that positive sense of self, which youths experienced during their overseas community service-learning expeditions, may increase the likelihood that they will experience a sense of mastery, confidence and belief in future. Larson (2000) believed that every youth had the capacity for learning and healthy development. The results seem to imply that given the learning opportunity to be involved in the overseas community service-learning expedition, youths may have the potential to increase their level of competencies. In conclusion, the YEP programme in Singapore is one such programme to build on youths' civic attitudes and competence skills.

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