

The Impact of Service-Learning on Japanese College Students: Involvement with Children with Disabilities

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本論文は、奉仕活動計画への関与が日本人大学生にもたらす影響について論じる。奉仕活動及びボランティアの日本文化の文脈内における概念化が考察される。学生ボランティア達は地域における障害をもつ子供達の養護学校におけるスポーツの日の催し物を援助した。日本においては、教育の経験の過程において、「典型的な優れた生徒」は障害を持つ子供達とはしばしば別の環境で教えられる。この結果、大学生達は、障害を持つ子供達とは何の接触や関与の経験もない場合が多い。本論文は、奉仕活動の経験に関する、少数のグループにおける熟考及び個々の参加者の文章による感想を分析する。分析結果は、このような奉仕活動への関与が大学生達の障害を持つ子供達に対する理解を深め、また、「我々と彼ら」というような従来の簡略化された視点に変化をもたらしたことを示している。こうして、障害者に対する社会的な対応が批判的に分析される。この奉仕活動は「公共に従事する」、そして、より大きな共同体へのさらなる参加をもたらし、行動を起こすことへ意識を高めたという諸側面から成功をもたらしたといえる。

This paper explores the impact of involvement in a service-learning project on Japanese college students. The conceptualization of service-learning and volunteerism in this cultural context is considered. The student volunteers assisted with a Sports Day event at a local school for children with disabilities. In Japan, "typically developing students" are often separated from children with disabilities throughout their educational experiences. As a result, these college students had no prior contact or involvement with children with disabilities. A small group reflective activity and individual written reactions to the experience were analyzed for emergent themes. Results revealed that involvement in this activity led to greater understanding of the experience of individuals with disabilities and changes in perceptions of "us versus them." The societal treatment of individuals with disabilities was also critiqued. This project was successful in "engaging the civic" and fostering greater involvement in the larger community and a sense of agency in taking action.

In this paper, the impact of participating in a service project on Japanese students is examined. The concepts of volunteerism, service-learning and civic engagement, among other terms often utilized in this field of study, will be explored as well. Essential benefits and limitations of service-learning will be discussed, as will the perception of service-learning in the Japanese context. This paper is a conceptual effort to explore the meaning of service to the community, based on experience in Japan.

Definitions

A number of definitions exist, attempting to differentiate such constructs as volunteerism, service-learning and civic engagement (APA, 2005). Other concepts such as charitable acts, civic education, service for social justice and community-based research have also been proposed (Boyle-Baise et al., 2006). Here, an examination of these definitions is warranted, in order to place the present project within the correct theoretical frame.

Furco (1996, as cited in APA, 2006) created a continuum depicting the distinctions among service programs. This continuum indicated a shift from *volunteerism* to *community service*, then *service-learning*, followed by *field education* and finally *internship*. Using this distinction, service-learning overlapped with both community service and field education. Bringle and Hatcher defined service learning as, "course-based, credit-bearing educational

experience that allows students to (a) participate in organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” (1995, p.112).

The American Association of Higher Education (APA, 2006) stated, “Service-learning means a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience.”

A broader definition of service-learning is offered by Campus Compact, a national center focused on community service and service-learning, based in the United States. Campus Compact (2006) states, “1) Service-learning constitutes activity that is focused on meeting a human need in the community where that need has to do with the well-being of individuals and/or of the environment in which they live. 2) Key academic and/or civic objectives to be achieved through combining service with learning have been identified prior to the activity. 3) Opportunities for students to reflect on their experience and its connection to specific academic/civic objectives are incorporated into the activity.”

Henry and Breyfogle (2006) distinguish between volunteerism and service-learning based on the inclusion of “reciprocity,” typically described as mutuality between the needs and outcomes of the “provider” and the “recipient” in a service-learning relationship. They state that service learning is differentiated from volunteerism based on the inclusion of both reflection and reciprocity.

Many teachers who incorporate community-based service activities state that they do so in order to engage their students in the “real world” and to foster a sense of community and individual responsibility, referred to by Boyle-Baise, et al. (2006) as *enabling the civic*. Many definitions of civic engagement abound. It has been identified as “individual and collective actions designed to identify issues of public concern” and “efforts to directly address an issue, work with others to solve a problem, or interact with institutions of representative democracy” (APA, 2006).

Even within the accepted definition of service-learning there are numerous facets, from *charitable acts* that provide immediate assistance to others, to *civic education*, meaning helping clients to help themselves (Boyle-Baise, et al., 2006). *Service for social justice* allows students to understand inequities and tends to foster activism, while *community-based research* teaches students to investigate social programs, affording them opportunities to improve those programs if they so desire. Boytle (2003) argues that there are two types of service-learning, the “thin” version that focuses on service, which he argues is oriented toward maintaining the status quo, while the “thick” version of service-learning includes organization, an aspect Boytle described as being necessary for social change. Recent literature in the area of service-learning argues that traditional views of service-learning omit the evolutionary change that results as an outcome of a service-learning project, in which both the “participants” and the “recipients” will be changed in the process (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006).

Importance of Reflection

Although the definitions above represent various viewpoints regarding the meaning of service-learning, there is one commonality seen among all of them, namely the inclusion of reflection as an integral aspect of a service-learning project. A number of studies in service-learning have focused on the importance of reflection. The theory behind reflection has been examined, as have strategies for fostering reflection in students (Connors & Seifer, 2005). Templates and learning style inventories have been created to explore the best means of encouraging reflection in students. Reflection has widely been cited as the essential element in

facilitating students in making connections between the activity in which they participate and the learning or change that results from that participation.

The theory behind reflection was first adapted from the work of John Dewey and later, David Kolb (Connors & Seifer, 2005). Based on those early works, the most well-known researcher in service-learning, Eyler, developed The Experiential Learning Cycle. This cycle involves experiencing (the activity phase), sharing (exchanging reactions and observations), processing (discussing patterns and dynamics), generalizing (developing real-world principles), and applying (planning effective use of learning). Reflection is the tool by which movement through these stages is thought to be achieved.

The four core elements of reflection, were established by Eyler and Giles (1999). These researchers found that for reflection to be most beneficial, it ought to be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. Reflection should begin prior to the service-learning activity and should be maintained throughout the experience. The service activity should be related to either course objectives, or learning objectives for a particular group. Student volunteers should be challenged in this thinking, through critical reflection. Instructors can elicit good information from students when they provide thought provoking questions for the students to answer. Lastly, reflections that correspond to course content, or to the topics being discussed, allow students to experience the service-learning in a meaningful way. Additionally, when reflection is done with fellow students or with community partners, the impact on students is believed to be greater than when students are requested to undertake individual reflection alone (Connors & Seifer, 2005).

Current Project in Context

It could be argued that the present study, because its student volunteers were not enrolled in a particular course, does not constitute a service-learning project. Such would be true if utilizing the definition proposed by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) or Furco (2006), which mandate that a service-learning experience be situated within a credit-bearing course. However, this study included reflection and reciprocity, thereby not following the definition of simple volunteerism, either (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006).

Given the involvement of learning about the civic and social issue prior to the activity, the reciprocal agreement with the agency in assisting the student volunteers in understanding important concerns relevant to those “being served,” and the use of reflection, the current study will be analyzed in terms of a service-learning project. An additional consideration in placing this project within the scope of service-learning is the definition of service-learning most commonly used in Japan (Feinberg, 2002).

In the Japanese context, service-learning need not be directly related to a course and in fact, it is rarely related to a specific course. Rather, service-learning is in “free time” in Japanese schools, in which students are asked to create projects that will assist them in understanding their society and will lead to increased “moral character.” Given the present conceptualization of service-learning in Japan, the benefits of this study will be compared with other service-learning projects identified in the literature.

Service-Learning

Benefits of Service-Learning

As a field of study, service-learning began in the early to mid-1990s (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996). Early studies considered whether involvement with community-based activities could enhance learning or other outcomes in students. Indeed, involvement in service-learning projects has been shown to have a positive impact in a number of studies. Service-learning can promote self-esteem, thinking skills and the use of multiple abilities (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). It also provides the opportunity for authentic learning and altruism, which students can experience,

rather than consider as an abstraction. Bingle and Hatcher (1996) found that involvement in service-learning increases understanding of course content, teaches students to consider broader applications of what they have learned in the classroom, and increases students' sense of civic responsibility.

Recent research has looked not only at the short-term changes that result in the classroom and in the students who participate in service-learning projects. A look at the long-term academic benefits of involvement with service-learning suggest that students do attain long-term benefits, both academically in terms of grade point average, but also in their approach to learning (Strage, 2004). Students who participated in service-learning projects demonstrated a greater appreciation of their discipline, and achieved better grades within that discipline than students in courses that did not involve service-learning (Strage, 2004). Students in a randomized, controlled study that participated in service-learning in their first year as an undergraduate scored higher than students in the same major who had not taken the service-learning based courses, though the classes themselves were the same. The service-learning students' GPA was 4.8% higher, even after four years of college. The college seniors who had been involved with service-learning in their first year reported that the experience of using reflection in their work had stayed with them, even when it was not a requirement for other courses.

Benefits of involvement in service-learning can be found in the classroom as well as in the individual students. In the classroom, research has found increased student interest, increased problem-solving skills, and increased performance on multiple measures of learning (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996). Qualitatively, students and teachers both reported more enjoyment in the class when activities are linked to the "outside world."

In examining the personal impact of involvement with service-learning, students report greater compassion and empathy, as well as heightened awareness of their community and the world around them when they participate in service-learning projects (Feinberg, 2002). This involvement has been shown to have a significant positive impact on personal, attitudinal, moral, social and cognitive outcomes (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996). Students who participate in service-learning are more likely to be involved in future civic engagement and report positive character development (Aronson, 2006). In working with others, the students not only develop a greater understanding of the problems faced by others in their community, they also demonstrate increased social-emotional understanding of problems. Service-learning impacts personal qualities such as increased interpersonal skills and reduced stereotyping (Eyler, 2000).

Service-learning in higher education leads to subsequent involvement in the community (Eyler, 2000). It appears that the mediating factor in future community involvement is the development of the *civic identity*. Here, civic identity was described as a sense of personal efficacy combined with social responsibility. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that service-learning was linked to better problem-solving skills by increasing the level of complexity in students' problem analysis and identification of the locus of the problem. Problem-solving was also enhanced with the use of supportive arguments and critical thinking skills, creation of novel strategies for community action, and increased cognitive moral development.

Limitations of Knowledge about Service-Learning

There are limitations to what is known about the impact of service-learning. Several scholars have addressed the problems inherent in the majority of the published manuscripts on the topic and have raised questions about the methodology employed to understand its impact.

The first question asked by teachers considering including service-learning as a component to enhance or compliment classroom learning is often, "What is the impact of service-learning on academic performance?" Although research has begun to look at this issue (Strage, 2004), the results are not highly generalizable. Whether problem-solving strategies utilized in the context of a service-learning project are utilized by students in other contexts has

largely been unexplored. The transfer of learning that is sought with service-learning highlights the ability to systematically explore new problems, considering all of the stakeholders that may be impacted by changes in a community (Eyler, 2000). In order to measure this “preparation for future learning,” it is necessary to determine whether students have attained greater understanding and ability to apply their knowledge and problem-solving skills. However, since most service-learning studies consider the impact of involvement in a particular service-learning project, this type of information is difficult to obtain.

Will some students “feel sorry” for the marginalized groups, thereby creating a greater divide of “us versus them,” although the intention is to create greater understanding (Dahlquist, White & Humphers-Ginther, 2003)? This type of *noblesse oblige* has been noted in some service projects in which the students perceived of their work as “charity” rather than “involvement in their own community” (Boyle-Baise, 2006). The danger noted with *noblesse oblige* is that students can develop a paternalistic attitude toward those less fortunate.

How can the impacts of service-learning best be measured? Self-report has been the most common means of gathering information, yet other data that could substantiate the reports of increases in civic engagement, for example, would be useful (Eyler, 2000). Self-report measures can confuse satisfaction with learning. As a result, the data obtained often reflect students’ feeling about involvement in a project, rather than directly measuring complex cognitive outcomes. While understanding students’ feeling regarding their involvement in service-learning projects is relevant and important, that alone does not answer the questions raised about the impact of service-learning involvement.

What is the best way to increase students’ ability to learn from the real world? (Eyler, 2000). John Dewey, often cited as the “founder of the service-learning ethic” (1938, as cited by Eyler, 2000) wrote that the strength of service-learning is that it creates *educative experiences*, engaging students in worthwhile activities while stimulating intellectual curiosity. Dewey believed that this would lead to increased motivation and a sense of agency, or individual power to make a difference. Yet, not all service-learning projects result in the same degree of impact for students. Scholars are not yet well-informed of the variables that constitute a sound educative experience in service-learning from those that will have a smaller impact on the student participants.

Service-Learning in Japan

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, known as MEXT, instituted a plan in 2002, known as the “Rainbow Plan” (MEXT, 2002). This plan emphasizes as one of its seven priorities the teaching of children to become caring citizens through participation in community service programs. The MEXT plan promotes two weeks of “community service,” loosely defined, for both elementary and junior high school students. High school students are recommended to participate in community service for a total of one month each academic year. Individual schools are to determine the best way to implement this program into their curriculum.

Feinberg (2002) examined a case study of service learning in Japan in Kamakura Junior High School, affiliated with Yokohama National University, which served as a pilot project for the implementation of the Rainbow Plan. The students in Kamakura Junior High School met for one session a week, with a total of 25 periods, for a total of 50 hours per semester. The class was not teacher-directed, the students established their own projects and goals.

The pilot class chose to visit nursing homes, as a means of addressing the problem of the aging population in Japan (Feinberg, 2002). Since the students created the activities without linking them to learning about the issues and concerns of elderly persons, some of the activities that they created were not immediately successful. For example, one group of students created a “ring toss” activity, meant to increase the activity level of the individuals at the nursing home.

However, when one elderly person fell over in her wheelchair during this activity, the students were reportedly quite surprised and decided to reevaluate their plans for community service.

In evaluating the Japanese MEXT “Rainbow Plan,” Feinberg (2002) argues that, although Japan has recently included community service as an essential element in “character building” of Japanese children, the program could benefit from more structure. If the curriculum better supported the activities (such as learning about the particular concerns of the elderly before visiting them) and was organized by teachers (who could contact the nursing home, for example, and ask for feedback about what might be most beneficial to the residents), the program would have a much greater chance of succeeding. Feinberg argues that clear connections between service projects, the curriculum, and learning outcomes, would allow the goals of the service component to be met. Namely, students would develop a stronger sense of civic engagement and they would learn more about specific issues of concern in their respective communities.

Current Project

This project involved 14 students from a small liberal arts college in Japan. These students volunteered to participate in Sports Day at a local school for children with disabilities. The volunteers were not a part of any particular class; any student who expressed interest in the program could volunteer. There were no selection criteria other than the desire to be involved and the availability to participate in the program. The volunteers ranged in age from 18 to 22, with a mean age of 21.

At the Sports Day event, the student volunteers participated in a number of activities to assist the program, including holding the “finish line” for the races, moving wheelchairs from the beginning to the end of the race for the participants, lifting the participants and helping them move their limbs. The volunteers were “on hand” to help with situations as they arose, including helping a child who was having a seizure, moving equipment, and helping with the transition between the Sports Day activities. For three hours, the student volunteers assisted in numerous ways to ensure that the Sports Day was a success.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that the students involved in this activity would report increased awareness about children with disabilities, since most of the volunteers have had very little exposure to these children. Since these college-age students have largely been unaffected by the Rainbow Plan, sponsored by the Japanese government (MEXT), (which went into effect during their final years of high school), it was hypothesized that they would not have had much prior experience in community service activities. It was anticipated that involvement in this project would lead to reported changes in thinking about the status of children with disabilities in Japan.

Methods

Educational Component.

The students met with the organizer prior to the Sports Day event. They were informed about the school, given information about the level of education the children with disabilities receive, and participated in a discussion about the perceptions of disability in Japan.

Debriefing session

Following the event, the students were allowed a “debriefing session” with two of the special education teachers. One teacher was the organizer of the event and provided the students with direct information about the activity. The other, a master teacher with many years

experience as a teacher for children with disabilities, encouraged the student volunteers to ask questions and provided them with straightforward and honest answers. Although the students initially asked few questions, the master teacher's willingness to be frank with them allowed them to probe further and to critically question the position of these students in society, the parents' reaction to their children, and the level of separation the children with disabilities felt from society.

Small group reflection

Following the debriefing session, the students were broken up into small groups to reflect about the activity with the researcher and notes were taken regarding the volunteer's statements. The small groups were decided based on the comfort level of the student volunteers. As suggested by Eyler and Giles (1999), the "challenging" phase of reflection was done in peer groups, in which each student volunteer could voice his/her thoughts and opinions freely. The volunteers first gave their "initial impressions," followed by a series of questions. Although the questions utilized were the same for each student, they were administered in a semi-structured interview format, so the order was determined based on the content of the discussion. In some cases, the questions were not asked, as they had already been answered by the students in their discourse. The questions were as follows:

1. What surprised you about today's event?
2. What stands out for you as something that you will probably remember from today?
3. In Japanese society, people with disabilities are often not visible to the public. Why do you believe that is the case?
4. (added after hearing the initial responses of the student volunteers) What do you believe should be done in Japanese society to improve people's understanding of individuals with disabilities?

Individual reflection

In the week that followed the Sports Day activity, the student volunteers were given a list of questions and asked to think about their experience with the children with disabilities and to provide the researcher with a written reflection, using the following questions as the basis for their discussion.

1. How have your perceptions or ideas about people with disabilities changed as a result of visiting the School for Children with Disabilities?
2. How have you changed or grown personally by having volunteered at the School for Children with Disabilities?
3. How have you changed or grown personally by having been involved in other volunteering activities?
4. Did this experience make you want to do more volunteer work in the future?
5. What were your thoughts, feelings, or concerns when you first arrived at the School for Children with Disabilities for Sports Day?
6. Please describe any reactions you had about going to the School for Children with Disabilities. What were your thoughts, feelings or concerns at the end of the event?

Qualitative methodology was utilized to analyze the impact on the students of having participated in the project with children with disabilities. The pre-event questions, the small group discussion notes, as well as the reflective journals were included in the analysis. These multiple sources were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. When the researcher was unclear about the meaning of comments written by a student, follow-up questions were asked in order to clarify.

Results

There were a number of common themes that emerged from the information gathered about the impact of being involved with children with disabilities by assisting with their school's Sports Day event.

Same as me

Every student reported surprise at learning that, "they were just like me." Volunteers focused on the emotional expressions of the children, on their daily struggles, and on the fact that they have families and friends.

I realized they are the same as us. While I was watching the event, they showed their feelings through their eyes, I think. They can't talk to others, but they can communicate with their teachers or family. It is the same as us. I was surprised that I didn't really think of that before I did the volunteering.

Although reluctantly, each volunteer also admitted that he/she had not expected to feel this way, and most were unaware of their stereotypes about individuals with disabilities before actually encountering them.

I thought that people with disabilities were living in a different world than me. I felt sympathy toward them, but it wasn't empathy. I felt unconsciously that they were different from me, so I believed we live in different worlds and had different goals. However, by doing this activity, I noticed that my thinking was wrong. They are just the same as me. They want to be happy in their lives, with their families, just like us.

Before I joined the event, I thought that they were different and I wanted to take care of them out of pity. But, I realized that view was not right. I think that are not different and they just have strong (physical) characteristics. So, we don't need to feel sorry for them or have pity. I also have different characteristics from everyone else, their handicap [sic] is just one characteristic of them.

Moving experience

In possible contrast to college students in other countries, those in Japan have generally had few experiences with individuals with disabilities. This is likely caused by the separation of children with disabilities from their peers prior to the beginning of the school years. Children with disabilities in Japan often attend a special school and are not integrated with typically developing children. Of the 14 students in the present study, none had previously had contact with children with disabilities. One student had a grandfather who was in a wheelchair, although this was a result of a disease that occurred in his later years. This relative lack of exposure to individuals with disabilities likely increased the impact on these student volunteers of interacting with these children.

This experience made me think about myself. I could feel something was moving in my heart. The memory in here will not be forgotten in all of my life. With this moment, I changed the way that I saw the disabled.

Other students, in believing that expressing their emotion would be disrespectful to the children, attempted to hold back their emotions, those all but one student wrote about being "moved."

I was moved in my heart through seeing them aim for their goals. I was also moved to tears, but I didn't want to cry. I thought it was disrespectful for them, because what they were doing what was natural for them. I thought that, and held back my tears. However, when I saw a father standing at the finish line, calling his son's name, I couldn't stop my tears. I was encouraged by the children throughout the day.

Learning from them

The student volunteers expressed a surprise at learning from the children with disabilities. They acknowledged the reciprocal nature of service-learning, and noted that, although they had “volunteered to help,” the process of being involved in service changed them as well.

Actually, I went there to help them, but they helped me to know more about life. I learned what “happy” is, and gratitude. I thought, “I want to help them more, as much as I can.” At the same time, I wanted them to teach me more.

Students acknowledged that the “learning” that had occurred on their end was largely a result of a change in their attitude.

The experience at (school name) changed my perception toward disabilities. This means that I realized that I could not do the things that I had expected for children with disabilities. I thought I would be able to help them enjoy the day by communicating with them. However, I had no idea of how to communicate with the children because many of them could not speak. One girl grabbed my hand, and showed me how to help her with her walker. I realized I could learn a lot from them, and I didn’t have just be “the helper.” I learned a lot about the world by watching and interacting with those children.

Reflections on society

The students reflected about the role of society in developing their own view of children with disabilities. While this was an emergent theme in general, most of the comments made by the students were unique, ranging from an exploration of society’s laws that help people with disabilities to personal experiences of having a family in one student’s neighborhood “send a child away” who had been born with a physical disability. Students pondered the role of schools in Japan in educating students about “others” and explored the need to “be like everyone else” in Japanese society.

One common theme related to society was the appreciation of the teachers at the school for children with disabilities. The college student volunteers were uniformly impressed with the level of dedication the teachers had toward the students, and the “power” that they displayed in working with the children.

I was overwhelmed by the teachers’ power and their desire to help the children have fun. The teachers tried to put the students in the central position, to do whatever was needed to help them succeed. While looking at the teachers and the students doing the sports activities, I thought, “I wish I could be able to have that kind of strong power and desire to help other people.”

Engaging the civic

One of the primary goals of service-learning is to encourage civic engagement, to foster students in their involvement in the community, and to provide them with projects that instill in them a sense of agency and a desire to continue to be involved in the community after the commencement of the given project (Boyle-Baise et al, 2006; Aronson, 2006). The students involved in this project all indicated a desire to learn more about the issues surrounding individuals with disabilities.

I found out various ways to be involved with volunteer work as a result of going there. So, I have come to want to do more volunteer work in order to know more about people with various disabilities. I want to better understand about their lives.

Students in this study also expressed an overall desire to be greater involved in their community. They indicated a change in paradigm, from “thinking about helping” to taking action.

Just thinking of helping others will not change something. I used to think about helping others who need help and support. However, I couldn't put it into action. Through working on this project, I feel I can help disabled people and I feel I can help them in different places as well. I know they are in the community and I would like to be more involved with them.

Limitations of the Present Study

This study involved 14 students who volunteered to participate in Sports Day with the local School for Children with Disabilities. It was limited in scope in terms of number of participants and involvement of participant volunteers. It is possible that students who would volunteer for such a project might have a higher level of civic engagement than students who did not volunteer. Although efforts were made to educate students about issues related to children with disabilities in Japan prior the Sports Day event, the “educational aspect” was not directly linked to a credit-bearing course.

Students enrolled in this small liberal arts college complete their coursework in English. The researcher is a native English speaker and teaches in English to Japanese students. The student volunteers were asked to write their written reflections in English, a second language for most of the students. This complication may have limited the extent or the breadth of the information shared by students in their reflective journals. As an attempt to deal with this confounding factor, the researcher met with the students and reviewed what they had written, and allowed the students to add or clarify meanings if what they had written did not fully capture what they had intended to express. Yet, the limitation of completing written reflections in a non-native language cannot be dismissed.

Conclusions

Cross-cultural Conceptualization of Service-Learning

The field of service-learning is a rapidly growing area of academic study. Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray (2001) produced “At a Glance,” an 80 page annotated bibliography of what has been learned in the field thus far. Yet, the majority of the research has been conducted with a Western audience. The implications of the benefits of service-learning may be far-reaching. Yet, the conceptualization of service-learning in higher education, community partnerships and community-based action research are not as well recognized by institutions in other parts of the world.

In the case of Japan, service-learning is largely understood to mean the involvement of students in activities that will promote “moral character” (MEXT, 2002). Incorporating service-learning, as defined in the West (see Bingle and Hatcher, 1995) in credit-bearing courses is quite uncommon. Of the materials available regarding service-learning in Japan, much of it focuses on learning English as a Second Language (Edwards, 2001). ESL teachers, often native speakers of English and commonly from the West, seem to be more likely to incorporate service-learning strategies than their Japanese counterparts. The curriculum in Japanese primary and secondary schools is mandated by the national government (MEXT, 2002), with little room for individual teacher innovations or incorporation of additional projects in the classroom. At the tertiary educational level, few service-learning programs are in existence. This paper argues for the conceptualization of the present project as a service-learning project, despite it being separate from a formal class. Given the cultural context in which this project took place, the

author argues that implementation of out-of-class but still learning-linked service activities be evaluated for their impact on students' perceptions and development of a civic identity.

Impact on Students

Students in the present study reported greater recognition of the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families. They acknowledged changed perceptions of others well as themselves and expressed an understanding of the similarities among people, despite outward appearances. Involvement in the Sports Day activity was moving for the students and provided a unique opportunity for them to interact with individuals with disabilities. They realized that they were not solely in the role of "helper" or "teacher," but could also learn from those they were attempting to assist. Involvement in this activity prompted the students to ask questions about society and its treatment of individuals with disabilities. Since the completion of this project, several of the students have sought additional opportunities to be involved with the community to a greater extent. One student has just declared her senior thesis topic will be "What we can learn from volunteering." These are suggestive of some long-term impacts of involvement with the project.

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